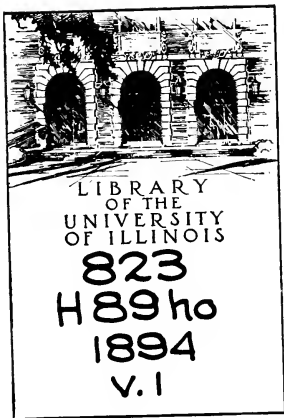


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# THE HOYDEN

*A NOVEL*

BY

MRS. HUNGERFORD

AUTHOR OF

'MOLLY BAWN,' 'THE O'CONNORS OF BALLINAHINCH,'  
'NOR WIFE NOR MAID,' ETC.

IN THREE VOLUMES

VOL. I.

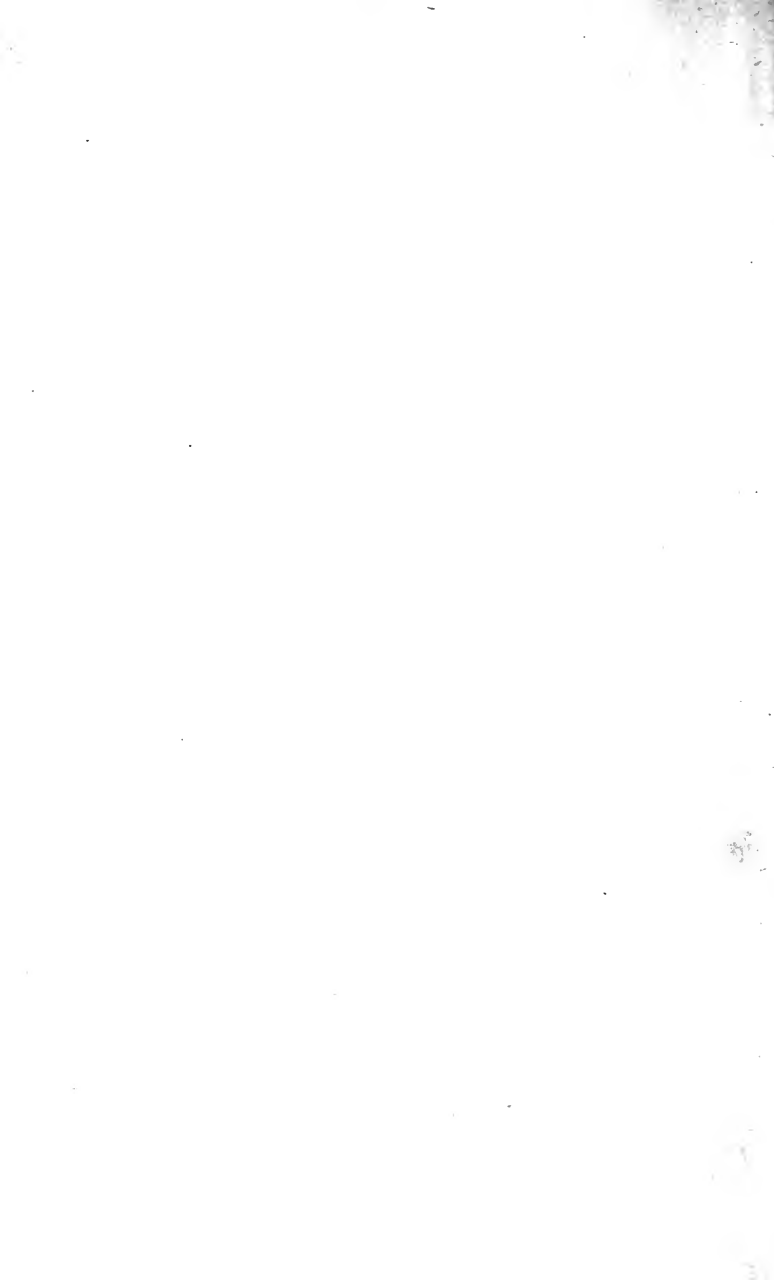


LONDON

WILLIAM HEINEMANN

1894

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# THE HOYDEN

## CHAPTER I.

HOW DIAMOND CUT DIAMOND, AND HOW THE  
SPARKS FLEW.

THE windows are all wide open, and through them the warm, lazy summer wind is stealing languidly. The perfume of the seringas from the shrubbery beyond, mingled with all the lesser but more delicate delights of the garden beneath, comes with the wind, and fills the drawing-room of The Place with a vague, almost drowsy sense of sweetness.

Mrs. Bethune, with a face that smiles always, though now her very soul is in

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revolt, leans back against the cushions of her lounging chair, her fine red hair making a rich contrast with the pale-blue satin behind it.

‘You think he will marry her, then?’

‘Think, think!’ says Lady Rylton pettishly. ‘I can’t afford to *think* about it. I tell you he *must* marry her. It has come to the very last ebb with us now, and unless Maurice consents to this arrangement——’

She spreads her beautiful little hands abroad, as if in eloquent description of an end to her sentence.

Mrs. Bethune bursts out laughing. She can always laugh at pleasure.

‘It sounds like the old Bible story,’ says she; ‘you have an only son, and you must sacrifice him!’

‘Don’t study to be absurd!’ says Lady Rylton, with a click of her fan that always means mischief.

She throws herself back in her chair, and a tiny frown settles upon her brow. She is such a small creation of Nature’s

that only a frown of the slightest dimensions *could* settle itself comfortably between her eyes. Still, as a frown, it is worth a good deal! It has cowed a good many people in its day, and had, indeed, helped to make her a widow at an early age. Very few people stood up against Lady Rylton's tempers, and those who did never came off quite unscathed.

'Absurd! Have I been absurd?' asks Mrs. Bethune. 'My dear Tessie'—she is Lady Rylton's niece, but Lady Rylton objects to being called aunt—'such a sin has seldom been laid to my charge.'

'Well, *I* lay it,' says Lady Rylton with some emphasis.

She leans back in her chair, and, once again unfurling the huge black fan she carries, waves it to and fro.

Marian Bethune leans back in her chair too, and regards her aunt with a gaze that never wavers. The two poses are in their way perfect, but it must be confessed that the palm goes to the younger woman.

It might well have been otherwise, as Lady Rylton is still, even at forty-six, a very graceful woman. Small—very small—a sort of pocket Venus as it were, but so carefully preserved that at forty-six she might easily be called thirty-five. If it were not for her one child, the present Sir Maurice Rylton, this fallacy might have been carried through. But, unfortunately, Sir Maurice is now twenty-eight by the church register. Lady Rylton hates church registers; they tell so much; and truth is always so rude!

She is very fair. Her blue eyes have still retained their azure tint—a rare thing at her age. Her little hands and feet are as tiny now as when years ago they called all London town to look at them on her presentation to her Majesty. She has indeed a charming face, a slight figure, and a temper that would shame the devil.

It isn't a quick temper—one can forgive that. It is a temper that remembers—remembers always, and that in a mild,

ladylike sort of way destroys the one it fastens upon. Yet she is a dainty creature ; fragile, fair, and pretty, even now. It is generally in these dainty, pretty, soulless creatures that the bitterest venom of all is to be found.

Her companion is different. Marian Bethune is a tall woman, with a face not perhaps strictly handsome, but yet full of a beautiful *diablerie* that raises it above mere comeliness. Her hair is red—a rich red—magnificent red hair that coils itself round her shapely head, and adds another lustre to the exquisite purity of her skin. Her eyes have a good deal of red in them, too, mixed with a warm brown—wonderful eyes that hold you when they catch you, and are difficult to forget. Some women are born with strange charms ; Marian Bethune is one of them. To go through the world with such charms is a risk, for it must mean ruin or salvation, joy or desolation to many. Most of all is it a risk to the possessor of those charms.

There have been some who have denied the right of Marian to the title beautiful. But for the most part they have been women, and with regard to those others—the male minority—well, Mrs. Bethune could sometimes prove unkind, and there are men who do not readily forgive. Her mouth is curious, large and full, but not easily to be understood. Her eyes may speak, but her mouth is a sphinx. Yet it is a lovely mouth, and the little teeth behind it shine like pearls. For the rest, she is a widow. She married very badly; went abroad with her husband; buried him in Montreal; and came home again. Her purse is as slender as her figure, and not half so well worth possessing. She says she is twenty-eight, and to her praise be it acknowledged that she speaks the truth. Even *good* women sometimes stammer over this question!

‘My sin, my sin?’ demands she now gaily, smiling at Lady Rylton.

She flings up her lovely arms, and

fastens them behind her head. Her smile is full of mockery.

‘Of course, my dear Marian, you cannot suppose that I have been blind to the fact that you and Maurice have—for the past year—been—er——’

‘Philandering?’ suggests Mrs. Bethune lightly.

She leans a little forward, her soft curved chin coming into recognition.

‘I beg, Marian, you won’t be vulgar,’ says Lady Rylton, fanning herself petulantly. ‘It’s worse than being immoral.’

‘Far, *far* worse!’ Mrs. Bethune leans back in her chair, and laughs aloud. ‘Well, I’m not immoral,’ says she.

Her laughter rings through the room. The hot sun behind her is lighting up the splendid masses of her red hair, and the disdainful gleam that dwells in her handsome eyes.

‘Of course not,’ says Lady Rylton, a little stiffly; ‘even to *mention* such a thing seems to be—er—a little——’

‘*Only* a little?’ says Mrs. Bethune, arching her brows. ‘Oh, Tessie!’ She pauses, and then with an eloquent gesture goes on again. ‘After all, why shouldn’t I be immoral?’ says she. Once again she flings her arms above her head so that her fingers grow clasped behind it. ‘It pays! It certainly pays. It is only the goody-goodies who go to the wall.’

‘My *dear* Marian!’ says Lady Rylton, with a delicate pretence at horror; she puts up her hands, but after a second or so bursts out laughing. ‘I always say you are the one creature who amuses me,’ cries she, leaning back, and giving full play to her mirth. ‘I never get *at* you, somehow. I am never *quite* sure whether you are very good or very—well, very much the other thing. That is your charm.’

The stupid, pretty little woman has reached a truth in spite of herself—that is Mrs. Bethune’s charm.

A quick change passes over the latter’s



face. There is extreme hatred in it. It is gone, however, as soon as born, and remains for ever a secret to her companion.

‘Does that amuse you?’ says she airily. ‘I dare say a perpetual riddle *is* interesting. One can never guess it.’

‘As for that, I can read you easily enough,’ says Lady Rylton, with a superior air. ‘You are original, but—yes—I can read you.’ She could as easily have read a page of Sanscrit. ‘It is your originality I like. I have never, in spite of many things, been in the least sorry that I gave you a home on the death of your—er—rather disreputable husband.’

Mrs. Bethune looks sweetly at her.

‘And *such* a home!’ says she.

‘Not a word, not a word,’ entreats Lady Rylton graciously. ‘But to return to Maurice. I shall expect you to help me in this matter, Marian.’

‘Naturally.’

‘I have quite understood your relations with Maurice during the past year. One,

as a matter of course,' with a shrug of her dainty shoulders, 'lets the nearest man make love to one—— But Maurice must marry for money, and so must you.'

'You are all wisdom,' says Marian, showing her lovely teeth. 'And this girl? She has been here a week now, but as yet you have told me nothing about her.'

'I picked her up!' says Lady Rylton. She lays down her fan—looks round her in a little mysterious fashion, as though to make doubly sure of the apparent fact that there is no one in the room but her niece and herself. 'It was the most providential thing,' she says; 'I was staying at the Warburtons' last month, and one day when driving their abominable ponies along the road, suddenly the little beasts took fright and bolted. You know the Warburtons, don't you? They haven't an ounce of manners between them—themselves, or their ponies, or anything else belonging to them. Well! They tore along as if possessed——'

‘The Warburtons?’

‘No, the ponies; don’t be silly!’

‘*Such* a relief!’

‘And I really think they would have taken me over a precipice. You can see’—holding out her exquisite little hands—‘how inadequate these would be to deal with the Warburton ponies. But for the timely help of an elderly gentleman and a young girl—she looked a mere child——’

‘This Miss Bolton?’

‘Yes. The old gentleman caught the ponies’ heads—so did the girl. You know my slender wrists—they were almost powerless from the strain, but that *girl*! her wrists seemed made of iron. She held and held, until the little wretches gave way and returned to a sense of decency.’

‘Perhaps they *are* made of iron. Her people are in trade, you say? Is it iron, or buttons, or what?’

‘I don’t know, I’m sure, but at all events she is an heiress to quite a tremendous extent. Two hundred thousand

pounds, the Warburtons told me afterwards ; even allowing for exaggeration, still, she must be worth a good deal, and poor dear Maurice, what is *he* worth ?

‘ Is it another riddle ? ’ asks Mrs. Bethune.

‘ No, no, indeed ! The answer is plain to all the world. The Warburtons didn’t know these people, these Boltons (so silly of them, with a third son still unmarried), but when I heard of her money I made inquiries. It appeared that she lived with her uncle. Her father had died early, when she was quite young. Her mother was dead too ; this last was a *great* comfort. And the uncle had kept her in seclusion all her life. They are nobodies, dear Marian ! Nobodies at all, but that girl has two hundred thousand pounds, and can redeem the property of all its mortgages—if only Maurice will let her do it.’

‘ But how did you ask her here ? ’

‘ How ? What is simpler ? The moment the Warburtons told me of the wealth that would be that girl’s on her marriage (I

was careful to make sure of the marriage point), I felt that an overpowering sense of gratitude compelled me to go and call on her. She and her uncle were newcomers in that county, and—it is very exclusive—so that when I *did* arrive, I was received with open arms. I was charming to the old uncle, a frosty sort of person, but not objectionable in any way, and I at once asked the niece to pay me a visit. They were flattered, the uncle especially so; I expect he had been wanting to get into Society—had held off from his own class a good deal—and as for the girl, she seemed overcome with delight! A very second-class little creature I thought her. No style! No suppression of her real feelings! She said at once how glad she would be to come to me; she gave me the impression that she would be glad to get away from her uncle! No idea of *hiding* anything! So strange!

‘Strange enough to be almost a fresh fashion. Fancy her saying she would be

glad to come to *you*! No wonder you were startled!

‘Well, she’s here,’ says Lady Rylton, furling her fan. Mrs. Bethune’s little sarcasm has been lost upon her. ‘And now, how to *use* her? Maurice, though I have thrust the idea upon him, seems averse to it.’

‘The idea?’

‘Of marrying her, of course, and so redeeming himself. She is not what I would have chosen for him, I admit that; but all things must give way before the ruin that threatens us.’

‘Yes; true—all things,’ says Mrs. Bethune in a low tone.

‘You see that. But how to bring Maurice to the point? He is so very difficult. *You*, Marian—you have influence with him——’

‘I?’

Mrs. Bethune rises in the slow, beautiful fashion that is hers always; she moves towards the window. There is no hurry,

no undue haste, to betray the disquietude of her soul.

‘You — you, of course,’ says Lady Rylton peevishly. ‘I always rely upon you.’

‘I have no influence!’

‘You mean, of course, that you will not use it,’ says Lady Rylton angrily. ‘You still think that you will marry him yourself, that perhaps his uncle will die and leave him once more a rich man—the master of The Place, as the old Place’s master should be; but that is a distant prospect, Marian.’

Mrs. Bethune has swung round, her beautiful figure is drawn up to its most stately height.

‘Not another word!’ says she imperiously. ‘What have I to do with your son? Let him marry—let him marry——’ She pauses as if choking, but goes on again: ‘I tell you I have no influence—*none!* Appeal to Margaret, she may help you!’

‘She—no!’

‘Hush! here she is. Yes; ask her,’ says Mrs. Bethune, as if desirous of letting Lady Rylton hear the opinion of the new-comer on this extraordinary subject.



## CHAPTER II.

HOW MARGARET PLEADS FOR THE LITTLE  
HOYDEN, AND WITH WHAT ILL-SUCCESS.

MARGARET KNOLLYS, entering the room and seeing the signs of agitation in the two faces before her, stops on the threshold.

‘I am disturbing you. I can come again,’ says she, in her clear, calm voice.

‘No,’ says Mrs. Bethune abruptly.

She makes a gesture as if to keep her.

‘Not at all. Not at all, dear Margaret. Pray stay, and give me a little help,’ says Lady Rylton plaintively.

She pulls forward a little chair near her, as if to show Margaret that she must stay,

and Miss Knollys comes quickly to her. Marian Bethune is Lady Rylton's real niece. Margaret is her niece by marriage.

A niece to be proud of, in spite of the fact that she is thirty years of age and still unmarried. Her features, taken separately, would debar her for ever from being called either pretty or beautiful ; yet there have been many in her lifetime who admired her, and three, at all events, who would have gladly given their all to call her theirs. Of these one is dead, and one is married, and one—still hopes.

There had been a fourth. Margaret loved him ! Yet he was the only one whom Margaret should not have loved. He was unworthy in all points. Yet, when he went abroad, breaking cruelly and indifferently all ties with her (they had been engaged), Margaret still clung to him, and ever since has refused all comers for his sake. Her face is long and utterly devoid of colour ; her nose is too large ; her mouth a trifle too firm for beauty ; her

eyes, dark and earnest, have, however, a singular fascination of their own, and when she smiles one feels that one *must* love her. She is a very tall woman, and slight, and gracious in her ways. She is, too, a great heiress, and a woman of business, having been left to manage a huge property at the age of twenty-two. Her management up to this has been faultless.

‘Now, how can I help you?’ asks she, looking at Lady Rylton. ‘What is distressing you?’

‘Oh! you know,’ says Mrs. Bethune, breaking impatiently into the conversation. ‘About Maurice and this girl! This new girl! There,’ contemptuously, ‘have been so many of them!’

‘You mean Miss Bolton,’ says Margaret, in her quiet way. ‘Do you seriously mean,’ addressing Lady Rylton, ‘that you desire this marriage?’

‘*Desire* it? No. It is a necessity!’ says Lady Rylton. ‘Who could desire a daughter-in-law of no lineage, and with

the most objectionable tastes? But she has money! That throws a cloak over all defects.'

'I don't think that poor child has so many defects as you fancy,' says Miss Knollys. 'But for all that I should not regard her as a suitable wife for Maurice.'

Mrs. Bethune leans back in her chair and laughs.

'A suitable wife for Maurice!' repeats she. 'Where is *she* to be found?'

'Here! In this girl!' declares Lady Rylton solemnly. 'Margaret, you know how we are situated. You know how low we have fallen—you can understand that in this marriage lies our last hope. If Maurice can be induced to marry Miss Bolton——'

A sound of merry laughter interrupts her here. There comes the sound of steps upon the terrace — running steps. Instinctively the three women within the room grow silent and draw back a little. Barely in time; a tiny, vivacious figure

springs into view, followed by a young man of rather stout proportions.

‘No, no, no!’ cries the little figure, ‘you couldn’t beat me. I bet you anything you like you couldn’t. You may play me again if you will, and then,’ smiling and shaking her head at him, ‘we shall see!’

The windows are open and every word can be heard.

‘Your future daughter-in-law,’ says Mrs. Bethune, in a low voice, nodding her beautiful head at Lady Rylton.

‘Oh, it is detestable! A hoyden—a mere *hoyden*,’ says Lady Rylton pettishly. ‘Look at her hair!’

And, indeed, it must be confessed that the hoyden’s hair is not all it ought to be. It is in effect ‘all over the place’—it is straight here, and wandering there; but perhaps its wildness helps to make more charming the naughty childish little face that peeps out of it.

‘She has no manners—*none*!’ says Lady Rylton. ‘She——’

‘Ah, is that you, Lady Rylton?’ cries the small creature on the terrace, having caught a glimpse of her hostess through the window.

‘Yes, come in—come in!’ cries Lady Rylton, changing her tone at once, and smiling and beckoning to the girl with loving fingers. ‘I hope you have not been fatiguing yourself on the tennis-courts, you dearest child!’

Her tones are cooing.

‘I have won, at all events!’ says Tita, jumping in over the window-sill. ‘Though Mr. Gower,’ glancing back at her companion, ‘won’t acknowledge it.’

‘Why should I acknowledge it?’ says the stout young man. ‘It’s folly to acknowledge anything.’

‘But the truth is the truth!’ says the girl, facing him.

‘Oh no; on the contrary, it’s generally a lie,’ says he.

‘You ought to be ashamed of yourself,’ says Miss Bolton, turning her back on

him, which proceeding seems to fill the stout young man's soul with delight.

'Do come and sit down, dear child ; you look exhausted,' says Lady Rylton, still cooing.

'I'm not,' says Tita, shaking her head. 'Tennis is not so very exhausting—is it, Mrs. Bethune ?'

'I don't know, I'm sure. It seems to have exhausted your hair, at all events,' says Mrs. Bethune, with her quick smile. 'I think you had better go upstairs and settle it ; it is very untidy.'

'Is it? Is it?' says Tita.

She runs her little fingers through her pretty short locks, and gazes round. Her eyes meet Margaret's.

'No, no,' says the latter, laughing. 'It looks like the hair of a little girl. You,' smiling, '*are* a little girl. Go away and finish your fight with Mr. Gower.'

'Yes. Come! Miss Knollys is on my side. She knows I shall win,' says the stout young man ; and, whilst dis-

puting with him at every step, Tita disappears.

‘What a girl! No style, no manners,’ says Lady Rylton; ‘and yet I must receive her as a daughter. Fancy living with that girl! A silly child, with her hair always untidy, and a laugh that one can hear a mile off. Yet it must be done.’

‘After all, it is Maurice who will have to live with her,’ says Mrs. Bethune.

‘Oh, I hope not,’ says Margaret quickly.

‘Why?’ asks Lady Rylton, turning to her with sharp inquiry.

‘It would never do,’ says Margaret with decision. ‘They are not suited to each other. Maurice! and that *baby*! It is absurd! I should certainly not counsel Maurice to take such a step as that!’

‘Why not? Good heavens, Margaret, I hope you are not in love with him, too!’ says Lady Rylton.

‘Too?’

Margaret looks blank.



‘She means me,’ says Mrs. Bethune, with a slight, insolent smile. ‘You know, don’t you, how desperately in love with Maurice I am?’

‘I know nothing,’ says Miss Knollys, a little curtly.

‘Ah, you will!’ says Mrs. Bethune, with her queer smile.

‘The fact is, Margaret,’ says Lady Rylton, with some agitation, ‘that if Maurice doesn’t marry this girl, there—there will be an end of us all. He *must* marry her.’

‘But he doesn’t love—he barely knows her—and a marriage without love——’

‘Is the safest thing known.’

‘Under given circumstances! I grant you that if two people well on in life, old enough to know their own minds, and what they are doing, were to marry, it might be different. They might risk a few years of mere friendship together, and be glad of the venture later on. But for two *young* people to set out on life’s

journey with nothing to steer by—that would be madness !

‘Ah! yes. Margaret speaks like a book,’ says Mrs. Bethune, with an amused air; ‘Maurice, you see, is *so* young, *so* inexperienced——’

‘At all events, Tita is only a child.’

‘Tita! Is that her name?’

‘A pet name, I fancy. Short for Titania; she is such a little thing.’

‘Titania — Queen of the Fairies; I wonder if the original Titania’s father dealt in buttons! Is it buttons, or soap, or tar? You didn’t say,’ says Mrs. Bethune, turning to Lady Rylton.

‘I really don’t know—and as it *has* to be trade, I can’t see that it matters,’ says Lady Rylton, frowning.

‘Nothing matters, if you come to think of it,’ says Mrs. Bethune. ‘Go on, Margaret—you were in the middle of a sermon; I dare say we shall endure to the end.’

‘I was saying that Miss Bolton is only a child.’

‘She is seventeen. She told us about it last night at dinner. Gave us month and day. It was very clever of her. We *ought* to give her birthday-gifts, don’t you think? And yet you call her a child!’

‘At seventeen! What else?’

‘Don’t be ridiculous, Margaret,’ says Lady Rylton pettishly; ‘and, above all things, don’t be old-fashioned. There is no such product nowadays as a child at seventeen. There isn’t *time* for it. It has gone out! The idea is entirely exploded. Perhaps there were children aged seventeen long ago—one reads of them, I admit, but it is too long ago for one to remember. Why, I was only eighteen when I married your uncle.’

‘Poor uncle!’ says Mrs. Bethune; her tone is full of feeling.

Lady Rylton accepts the feeling as grief for the uncle’s death; but Margaret, casting a swift glance at Mrs. Bethune, wonders if it was meant for grief for the uncle’s life—with Lady Rylton.

‘He was the ugliest man I ever saw, without exception,’ says Lady Rylton placidly; ‘and I was never for a moment blind to that fact, but he was well off at that time, and, of course, I married him. I wasn’t in love with him.’ She pauses, and makes a little apologetic gesture with her fan and shoulders. ‘Horrid expression, isn’t it?’ says she. ‘In love! So terribly *bourgeois*. It ought to be done away with. However, to go on, you see how admirably my marriage turned out. Not a hitch anywhere. Your poor dear uncle and I never had a quarrel. I had only to express a wish, and it was gratified.’

‘Poor dear uncle was so clever,’ says Mrs. Bethune, with lowered lids.

Again Margaret looks at her, but is hardly sure whether sarcasm is really meant.

‘Clever? Hardly, perhaps,’ says Lady Rylton meditatively. ‘Clever is scarcely the word.’

‘No, wise—wise is the word,’ says Mrs. Bethune.

Her eyes are still downcast. It seems to Margaret that she is inwardly convulsed with laughter.

‘Well, wise or not, we lived in harmony,’ says Lady Rylton with a sigh and a prolonged sniff at her scent-bottle. ‘With us it was peace to the end.’

‘Certainly; it was peace *at* the end,’ says Mrs. Bethune solemnly.

It was, indeed, a notorious thing that the late Sir Maurice had lived in hourly fear of his wife, and had never dared to contradict her on any subject, though he was a man of many inches, and she one of the smallest creatures on record.

‘True! true! *You* knew him so well!’ says Lady Rylton, hiding her eyes behind the web of a handkerchief she is holding. One tear would have reduced it to pulp. ‘And when he was——’ She pauses.

‘Was dead?’ says Margaret kindly, softly.

‘Oh, *don't*, dear Margaret, *don't*!’ says Lady Rylton, with a tragical start. ‘That dreadful word! One should never mention death! It is so rude! He, your poor uncle—he *left* us with the sweetest resignation on the 18th of February, 1887.’

‘I never *saw* such resignation,’ says Mrs. Bethune, with deep emphasis.

She casts a glance at Margaret, who, however, refuses to have anything to do with it. But, for all that, Mrs. Bethune is clearly enjoying herself. She can never, indeed, refrain from sarcasm, even when her audience is unsympathetic.

‘Yes, yes; he was resigned,’ says Lady Rylton, pressing her handkerchief to her nose.

‘So much so, that one might almost think he was *glad* to go,’ says Mrs. Bethune, nodding her head with beautiful sympathy.

She is now shaking with suppressed laughter.

‘Yes; glad. It is such a comfort to

dwell on it,' says Lady Rylton, still dabbing her eyes. 'He was happy—quite happy when he left me.'

'I never saw anyone so happy,' says Mrs. Bethune.

Her voice sounds choking; no doubt it is emotion. She rises and goes to the window. The emotion seems to have got into her shoulders.

'All which proves,' goes on Lady Rylton, turning to Margaret, 'that a marriage based on friendship, even between two young people, is often successful.'

'But surely in your case there was love on one side,' says Miss Knollys, a little impatiently. 'My uncle——'

'Oh, he *adored* me!' cries she ecstatically, throwing up her pretty hands, her vanity so far overcoming her argument that she grows inconsistent. 'You know,' with a little simper, 'I was a belle in my day.'

'I have heard it,' says Margaret hastily,

who, indeed, has heard it *ad nauseam*. 'But with regard to this marriage, Tessie, I don't believe you will get Maurice to even think of it.'

'If I don't, then he is ruined!' Lady Rylton gets up from her chair, and takes a step or two towards Margaret. 'This house-party that I have arranged, with this girl in it, is a last effort,' says she in a low voice, but rather hysterically. She clasps her hands together. 'He must—he *must* marry her. If he refuses——'

'But she may refuse him,' says Margaret gently; 'you should think of that.'

'She—she refuse? You are mad!' says Lady Rylton. 'A girl—a girl called *Bolton*.'

'It is certainly an ugly name,' says Margaret in a conciliatory way.

'And yet you blame me because I desire to give her Rylton instead, a name as old as England itself. I tell you, Margaret,' with a little delicate burst of passion, 'that it goes to my very soul to accept this girl



as a daughter. She—she is *hateful* to me, not only because of her birth, but in every way. She is antagonistic to me. She—would you believe it?—she has had the audacity to argue with me about little things, as if she—*she*, imperiously, ‘should have an opinion when I was present.’

‘My dear Tessie, we all have opinions, and you know you said yourself that at seventeen nowadays one is no longer a child.’

‘I wish, Margaret, you would cure yourself of that detestable habit of repeating one’s self *to* one’s self,’ says Lady Rylton resentfully. ‘There,’ sinking back in her chair, and saturating her handkerchief with some delicate essence from a little Louis Quatorze bottle beside her, ‘it isn’t worth so much worry. But to say that she would refuse Maurice——’

‘Why should she not? She looks to me like a girl who would not care to risk all her future life for mere position. I mean,’ says Margaret a little sadly, ‘that

she looks to me as if she would be like that when she is older, and understands.'

'Then she must look to you like a fool,' says Lady Rylton petulantly.

'Hardly that. Like a girl, rather, with sense, and with a heart.'

'My dear girl, we know how romantic you are, we know that old story of yours,' says Lady Rylton, who can be singularly nasty at times. 'Such an *old* story, too. I think you might try to forget it.'

'Does one ever forget?' says Margaret coldly. A swift flush has dyed her pale face. 'And story or no story, I shall always think that the woman who marries a man without caring for him is far a greater fool than the woman who marries a man for whom she does care.'

'After all, I am not thinking of a woman,' says Lady Rylton with a shrug. 'I am thinking of Maurice. This girl has money; and, of course, she will accept him if I can only induce him to ask her.'

'It is not altogether of course!'

‘*I think it is,*’ says Lady Rylton obstinately.

Miss Knollys shrugs her shoulders.

All at once Mrs. Bethune turns from the window and advances towards Margaret. There is a sudden fury in her eyes.

‘What do you mean?’ says she, stopping short before Miss Knollys, and speaking with ill-suppressed rage. ‘Who is *she*, that she should refuse him? That little, contemptible child! That nobody! I tell you, she would not dare refuse him if he asked her! It would be too great an honour for her.’

She stops. Her fingers tighten on her gown. Then, as suddenly as it grew, her ungovernable fit of anger seems to die, checked, killed by her own will. She sinks into the chair behind her, and looks deliberately at Margaret with an air that, if not altogether smiling, is certainly altogether calm. It must have cost her a good deal to do it.

‘It is beyond argument,’ says she; ‘he will not ask her.’

‘He *shall*,’ says Lady Rylton in a low tone.

Margaret rises, and moves slowly towards one of the open windows; she pauses there a moment, then steps out on to the balcony, and so escapes. These incessant discussions are abhorrent to her, and just now her heart is sad for the poor child who has been brought down here ostensibly for amusement, in reality for business. Of course, Maurice will not marry her—she knows Maurice, he is far above all that sort of thing; but the very attempt at the marriage seems to cover the poor child with insult. And she is such a pretty child.

At this moment the pretty child, with Randal Gower, comes round the corner; she has her skirt caught up at one side, and Miss Knollys can see it is full of broken biscuits. The pulling up of the skirt conduces a good deal to the showing

of a lovely little foot and ankle, and Margaret, who has the word 'hoyden' still ringing in her ears, and can see Lady Rylton's cold, aristocratic, disdainful face, wishes the girl had had the biscuit in a basket.

'Oh, here is Miss Knollys!' cries Tita, running to her. 'We are going to feed the swans' (she looks back at her companion). 'He has got some more biscuits in his pockets.'

'It's quite true,' says Mr. Gower; 'I'm nothing but biscuits. Every pocket's full of 'em, and they've gone to dust. I tried to blow my nose a moment ago, but I couldn't. One can't blow one's nose in biscuit.'

'Come with us, Miss Knollys—do,' says Tita coaxingly.

'I can't. Not now. I can't,' says Margaret, who is a little troubled at heart. 'Go, dear child, and feed the swans, and take care of her, Randy—take care of her.'

'I'll do my little best,' says Mr. Gower,

with much solemnity; 'but it's small—very small. As a rule, Miss Bolton takes care of me.'

Margaret gives him a last admonitory glance and turns away. In truth, Mr. Gower is but a broken reed to lean upon.

### CHAPTER III.

HOW LADY RYLTON SAYS A FEW THINGS THAT  
WOULD HAVE BEEN BETTER LEFT UNSAID.  
HOW 'THE SCHEME' IS LAID BEFORE SIR  
MAURICE, AND HOW HE REFUSES TO HAVE  
ANYTHING TO DO WITH IT.

IN the meantime the conversation in the drawing-room has been going on.

'Of course, if you think you can persuade him,' says Mrs. Bethune presently.

'I know I shall. One can always persuade a man where his interests lie. Besides, I have great weight with him. I tell you I shall manage him. I could always manage his father.'

A curious expression crosses Mrs.

Bethune's face. The present Baronet may not prove so easy of management as his father!

'Well, I can only wish you success,' says she, with a shrug. 'By the way, Margaret did not back you up in this scheme as cordially as I deemed possible.'

'Margaret is so troublesome,' says Lady Rylton. 'Just when you expect her to sympathize with you, she starts off at a tangent on some other absurd idea. She is full of fads. After all, it would be rash to depend on her. But *you*, Marian—you owe me much.'

'How much? My life's blood?'

Mrs. Bethune lets her hands fall clasped upon her knees, and, leaning over them, looks at her aunt—such a wonderfully young aunt, with her yellow hair and her sparkling eyes! Marian's lips have taken a cynical turn; her smile now is unpleasant.

'What a hideous expression!' says Lady Rylton, shuddering. 'You spoil yourself,



Marian ; you do indeed. You will never make a good marriage if you talk like that.

“ Life’s blood ” !—*detestable* !”

‘ I don’t desire a good marriage, as *you* regard it.’

Lady Rylton sits suddenly quite upright.

‘ If you mean marriage with Maurice,’ says she, ‘ put that out of your head. You must be mad to cherish such a hope. You are both paupers, for one thing, and for the rest, I assure you, my dear, Maurice is not as infatuated about you as you are about him !’

Mrs. Bethune makes a sudden movement ; it is slight. Her face darkens. One reading between the lines might at this moment see that she could have killed Lady Rylton with a wondrous joy. Killing has its consequences, however, and she only stands quite quiet, looking at her foe. What a look it is !

‘ It is you who are mad,’ says she calmly. ‘ What I meant was that I should probably marry some rich nobody for the sake of

his wealth. It would be quite in my line. I should arrange him, form him, bring him into Society, even against Society's will ! There is a certain excitement in the adventure. As for Maurice, he is no doubt in your eyes a demigod—in mine,' with infinite contempt, 'he is a man.'

'Well, I hope you will keep to all that,' says Lady Rylton, who is as shrewd as she is cruel, 'and that you will not interfere with this marriage I have arranged for Maurice.'

'Why should I interfere ?'

'Because you interfere always. You can't bear to see any man love any woman but yourself.'

Mrs. Bethune smiles. 'A common fault. It belongs to most women. But this girl—you like her ?'

'On the contrary, as I have told you, I detest her. Once Maurice has her money safely in his hands, I shall know how to deal with her. A little, ignorant, detestable child ! I tell you, Marian, that the

time will come when I shall pay her out for her silly insolence towards me.'

'She is evidently going to have a good time if Maurice proposes to her.'

'He *shall* propose. Why——' She breaks off suddenly. 'Not another word,' says she, putting up her hand. 'Here is Maurice. I shall speak to him now.'

'Shall I stay and help you?'

'No, thank you,' says Lady Rylton, with a little knowing grimace.

Seeing it, Marian's detestation grows apace. She rises—and calmly, yet swiftly, leaves the room. Sir Maurice is only crossing the lawn now, and by running through the hall outside, and getting on to the veranda outside the dining-room window, she can see him before he enters the drawing-room.

Gaining the veranda, she leans over the railings and makes a signal to him; it is an old signal. Rylton responds to it, and in a second is by her side.

'Oh no, you must not stay; your mother

is waiting for you in the south drawing-room. She saw you coming; she wants you.'

'Well, but about what?' asks Rylton, naturally bewildered.

'Nothing—only—she is going to advise you for your good. Shall I,' smiling at him in her beautiful way, and laying one hand upon his breast—'shall I advise you, too?'

'Yes, yes,' says Rylton; he takes the hand lying on his breast and lifts it to his lips. 'Advise me.'

'Ah, no!' She pauses, a most eloquent pause, filled with a long deep glance from her dark eyes. '*There, go!*' she says, suddenly pushing him from her.

'But your advice?' asks he, holding her.

'Pouf! as if that was worth anything.' She looks up at him from under her lowered lids. 'Well, take it. My advice to you is to come to the rose-garden as soon as possible, and see the roses before they fade out of all recognition! *I* am

going there now. You know how I love that rose-garden ; I almost live there nowadays.'

'I wish I could live there too,' says Rylton, laughing.

He lifts her hand again and presses it fondly to his lips. Something, however, in his air, though it had breathed devotion, troubles Mrs. Bethune ; she frowns as he leaves her, and, turning into a side-path that leads to the rose-garden, gives herself up a prey to thought.

\* \* \* \* \*

Rylton, with a shrug, goes towards the room where Marian had told him his mother was awaiting him. He could very readily (as Lady Rylton had not formally requested his presence) have stayed away, but long experience has driven into him the knowledge that when his mother wants anything, all the delays and subterfuges and evasions in the world will not prevent her having it. To get it over, then, as soon as possible is the chief thing. And,

after all, he is so far happy in that he knows what the immediate interview is to be about. That little ridiculous girl—not half a bad little girl—but——

It is with quite a resigned air that he seats himself on the lounge, and agrees with himself to make his mother happy by letting her talk to him uninterruptedly for ten minutes.

‘Women like to talk,’ says Sir Maurice to himself, as he sits on the lounge where Marian had just now sat. He finds consolation in his mother’s poodle, who climbs on his knees, giving herself up a willing prey to his teasing.

‘Maurice, you are not attending,’ says Lady Rylton at last, with a touch of serious anger.

‘I am indeed—I am, I assure you,’ says Maurice, looking up. ‘If I’m not, it’s your poodle’s fault; she is such a fascinating creature.’

As he says this he makes a little attack on the poodle, who snaps back at him,

barking vigorously, and evidently enjoying herself immensely.

‘I want a decisive answer from you,’ says his mother.

‘A decisive answer! How can I give that?’

He is still laughing, but even as he laughs a sound from without checks him. It is another laugh—happy, young, joyous. Instinctively both he and Lady Rylton look towards the open window. There below, still attended by Mr. Gower, and coming back from her charitable visit to the swans, is Tita, her little head upheld, her bright eyes smiling, her lips parted. There is a sense of picturesque youth about the child that catches Rylton’s attention, and holds it for the moment.

‘There she is,’ says he at last, looking back over his shoulder at his mother. ‘Is *that* the wife you have meted out for me—that baby?’

‘Be serious about it, Maurice; it is a serious matter, I assure you.’

‘Fancy being serious with a baby! She’s too young, my dear mother. She couldn’t know her duty to her neighbours yet, to say nothing of her duty to her husband.’

‘You could teach her.’

‘I doubt it. They have taken that duty off nowadays, haven’t they?’ He is still looking at Tita through the window; her gay little laugh comes up to him again. ‘Do you know, she is very pretty,’ says he dispassionately; ‘and what a little thing! She always makes me think of a bird, or a mouse, or a——’

‘Think of her as a girl,’ says his mother impatiently.

‘Certainly. After all, it would be impossible to think of her as a boy; she’s too small.’

‘I don’t know about that,’ said Lady Rylton, shrugging her shoulders. ‘She’s much more a boy than a girl, where her manners are concerned.’

‘Poor little hoyden! That’s what you call her, isn’t it—a hoyden?’



‘Did Marian tell you that?’

‘Marian? Certainly not!’ says Sir Maurice, telling his lie beautifully. ‘Marian thinks her beneath notice. So would you, perhaps, if——’ He pauses. ‘If she hadn’t a penny you wouldn’t know her,’ he says presently; ‘and you admit she has no manners, yet you ask me to marry her. Now, if I did marry her, what should I do with her?’

‘Educate her! Control her!’ says his mother, a little viciously.

‘I confess I am not equal to the occasion. I could not manage a baby. The situation doesn’t suit me.’

‘Maurice—it *must*!’ Lady Rylton rises, and, standing near him with her hand on the table, looks at him with a pale face. ‘You find fault with her; so do I, and frankly admit she is the last woman in the world I should have chosen for you if I could help it, but she is one of the richest girls in England. And after all, though I detest the very sound of it.

Trade is now our master. You object to this girl's youth ; that, however, is in her favour. You can mould her to your own designs, and'—she casts a bitter glance at him that will not be suppressed—'all women cannot be widows. Then, as for her being so little a creature, she is surely quite as tall as I am, and your father—you know, Maurice, how devoted he was to me.'

'Oh yes, poor old Dad !' says Maurice, with a movement that might mean pain. He seldom speaks of his father—*never* to his mother. He had certainly loved his father. He moves quickly to the further end of the room.

'You will think of this girl, Maurice ?'

'Oh, if that's all,' laughing shortly, 'you have arranged for that. One can't help thinking of the thing that is thrust under one's eyes morning, noon, and night. I shall think of her certainly until she goes away.' He stops, and then says abruptly, 'When is she going ?'

‘When her engagement to you is an accomplished fact.’

‘My dear mother, how absurd it all is! Poor little girl, and what a shame too! She doesn’t even like me! We shouldn’t be taking her name in vain like this. By-the-bye, what queer eyes she has!—have you noticed?’

‘She has two hundred thousand pounds,’ says Lady Rylton solemnly. ‘That is of far greater consequence. You know how it is with us, Maurice. We can hold on very little longer. If you persist in refusing this last chance, the old home will have to go. We shall be beggars!’ She sinks back in her chair, and sobs softly but bitterly.

‘Don’t go on like that—don’t!’ says Rylton, coming over to her and patting her shoulder tenderly. ‘There must be some other way out of it. I know we are in a hole more or less, but——’

‘How lightly you speak of it! Who is to pay your debts? You know how your

gambling on the turf has ruined us—brought us to the very verge of disgrace and penury, and now, when you *can* help to set the old name straight again, you refuse—refuse!’ She stops as if choking.

‘I don’t think my gambling debts are the actual cause of our worries,’ says her son, rather coldly. ‘If I have wasted a few hundreds on a race here and there, it is all I have done. When the property came into my hands it was dipped very deeply.’

‘You would accuse your father——’ begins she hotly.

Rylton pauses. ‘No; not my father,’ says he distinctly, if gently.

‘You mean, then, that you accuse *me*!’ cries she, flashing round at him.

All at once her singularly youthful face grows as old as it ought to be—a vindictive curve round the mouth makes that usually charming feature almost repulsive.

‘My dear mother, let us avoid a scene,’ says her son sternly. ‘To tell you the

truth, I have had too many of them of late.'

Something in his manner warns her to go no farther in the late direction. If she is to win the cause so close to her heart, she had better refrain from recrimination—from an accusation of any sort.

'Dearest Maurice,' says she, going to him and taking his hand in hers, 'you know it is for your sake only I press this dreadful matter. She is so rich, and you—we—are so poor! She has a house in Surrey, and one in the North—delightful places, I have been told—and, of course, she would like you to keep up your own house in town. As for me, all I ask is this old house—bare and uncomfortable as it is.'

'Nonsense, mother,' letting her hand go and turning away impatiently. 'You speak as if it were all settled.'

'Why should it *not* be settled?'

'You talk without thinking!' He is frowning now, and his tone is growing

angry. 'Am I the only one to be consulted?'

'Oh! as for her—that child! Of course you can influence her.'

'I don't want to,' wearily.

'You can do more than that. You are very good-looking, Maurice. You can——' She hesitates.

'Can what?' coldly.

'Fascinate her.'

'I shall certainly not even try to do that. Good heavens! what do you mean?' says her son, colouring a dark red with very shame. 'Are you asking me to make love to this girl—to pretend an admiration for her that I do not feel? To—to—*lie* to her?'

'I am only asking you to be sensible,' says his mother sullenly. She has gone back to her chair, and now, with lowered lids and compressed lips, is fanning herself angrily.

'I shan't be sensible in that way,' says her son, still very hotly. 'Put it out of

your head. To me this Miss Bolton (it is really ridiculous to call her Miss anything; she ought to be Betty, or Lizzie, or Lily, or whatever her name is, to everyone at her age)—to me she seems nothing but a baby—and—I *hate* babies!

‘Marian has taught you!’ says his mother, with a sneer. ‘*She* certainly is not a baby, whatever else she may be. But I tell you this, Maurice, that you will hate far more being left a beggar in the world, without enough money to keep yourself alive.’

‘I am sure I can keep myself alive.’

‘Yes, but how? *You*, who have been petted and pampered all your life?’

‘Oh, *don’t* speak to me as if I were in the cradle!’ says Maurice, with a shrug.

‘Do you never think?’

‘Sometimes.’

‘Oh yes, of Marian. That designing woman! Do you believe *I* haven’t read her, if you are still blind? She will hold you on and on and on. And if your uncle

*should* chance to die, why, then she will marry you; but if in the meantime she meets anyone with money who will marry her, why, good-bye to *you*. But you must not marry! Mind that! You must be held in chains whilst she goes free. Really, Maurice,' rising and regarding him with extreme contempt, 'your folly is so great over this absurd infatuation for Marian, that sometimes I wonder if you can be my own son.'

'I am my father's son also,' says Maurice. 'He, I believe, did sometimes believe in somebody. He believed in you.'

He turns away abruptly, and an inward laugh troubles him. Was that last gibe not an argument against himself, his judgment? Like his father; *is* he like his father? Can he, too, see only gold where dross lies deep? Sometimes, of late, he has doubted. The laughter dies away, he sighs heavily.

'He was wise,' says Lady Rylton coolly.



‘He had no cause to regret his belief. But you, you sit in a corner, as it were, and see nothing but Marian smiling. You never see Marian frowning. Your corner suits you. It would trouble you too much to come out into the middle of the room and look round Marian. And in the end what will it all come to? *Nothing!*’

‘Then why make yourself so unhappy about nothing?’

‘Because——’

‘My dear mother,’ turning rather fiercely on her, ‘let us have an end of this. Marian would not marry me. She has refused me many times.’

‘I am quite aware of that,’ says Lady Rylton calmly. ‘She has taken care to tell me so. She will never marry you unless you get your uncle’s money (and he is as likely to live to be a Methuselah as anyone I ever saw; the scandalous way in which he takes care of his health is really a byword!), but she will hold you on until——’

‘I asked you not to go on with this,’ says Rylton, interrupting her again. ‘If you have nothing better to say to me than the abuse of Marian, I——’

‘But I have. What is Marian, what is *anything* to me except your marriage with Tita Bolton? Maurice, think of it. Promise me you will think of it. Maurice, don’t go.’

She runs to him, lays her hand on his arm, and tries to hold him.

‘I must.’ He lifts her hand from his arm, presses it, and drops it deliberately. ‘My dear mother, I can’t; I can’t, really,’ says he.

She stands quite still. As he reaches the door, he looks back. She is evidently crying. A pang shoots through his heart. But it is all so utterly impossible. To marry that absurd child! It is out of the question. Still, her tears trouble him. He can see her crying as he crosses the hall, and then her words begin to trouble him even more. What was it she had

said about Marian ? It was a hint, a very broad one. It meant that Marian might love him if he were a poor man, but could love him much more if he were a rich one. As a fact, she would marry him if he had money, but not if he were penniless. After all, why not ? She, Marian, had often said all that to him, or at least some of it. But that other word, of her marrying some other man should he appear——

## CHAPTER IV.

HOW THE HEART OF MAURICE GREW HOT  
WITHIN HIM, AND HOW HE PUT THE  
QUESTION TO THE TOUCH, AND HOW HE  
NEITHER LOST NOR WON.

MRS. BETHUNE, sauntering slowly between the bushes laden with exquisite blooms, all white and red and yellow, looks up as he approaches her with a charming start.

‘You!’ she says, smiling, and holding out her hand—a large hand, but beautiful. ‘It is my favourite spot. But that *you* should have come here too!’

‘You knew I should come!’ returns he gravely. Something in her charming air of surprise jars upon him at this moment. Why should she pretend?—and to him!

‘ I knew ?’

‘ You told me you were coming here.’

‘ Ah, what a lovely answer !’ says she, with a glance from under her long lashes, that—whatever her answer may be—certainly *is* lovely.

Rylton regards her moodily. If she really loved him, would she coquet with him like this—would she so pretend ? All in a second, as he stands looking at her, the whole of the past year comes back to him. A strange year, fraught with gladness and deep pain—with fears and joys intense ! What had it all meant ? If anything, it had meant devotion to her—to this cousin, who, widowed, all but penniless, had been flung by the adverse winds of Fate into his home.

She was the only daughter of Lady Rylton’s only brother, and the latter had taken her in, and in a measure adopted her. It was a strange step for her to take—for one so little led by kindly impulses, or rather for one who had so few kindly

impulses to be led by ; but everyone has a soft spot somewhere in his heart, and Lady Rylton had loved her brother, good-for-nothing as he was. There might have been a touch of remorse, too, in her charity ; she had made Marian's marriage !

Grudgingly, coldly, she opened her son's doors to her niece, but still she opened them. She was quite at liberty to do this, as Maurice was seldom at home, and gave her always *carte blanche* to do as she would with all that belonged to him. She made Marian Bethune's life for the first few months a burden to her, and then Marian Bethune, who had waited, took the reins in a measure ; at all events, she made herself so useful to Lady Rylton that the latter could hardly get on without her.

Maurice had fallen in love with her almost at once ; insensibly but thoroughly. There had been an hour in which he had flung himself, metaphorically, at her feet (one never does the real thing now, because it spoils one's trousers so), and

offered his heart, and all the fortune still left to him after his mother's reign; and Marian had refused it all, very tenderly, very sympathetically, very regretfully—to tell the truth—but she *had* refused it.

She had sweetened the refusal by declaring that, as she could not marry him—as she could not be so selfish as to ruin his prospects—she would never marry at all. She had looked lovely in the light of the dying sunset as she said all this to him, and Maurice had believed in her a thousand times more than before, and had loved her a thousand times deeper. And in a sense his belief was justified. She did love him, as she had never loved before, but not well enough to risk poverty again. She had seen enough of that in her first marriage, and in her degradation and misery had sworn a bitter oath to herself never again to marry, unless marriage should sweep her into the broad river of luxury and content. Had Maurice's financial affairs been all they ought to

have been but for his mother's extravagances, she undoubtedly would have chosen him before all the world ; but Maurice's fortunes were (and are) at a low ebb, and she would risk nothing. His uncle *might* die, and then Maurice, who was his heir, would be a rich man ; but his uncle was only sixty-five, and he might marry again, and—— No, she would refuse !

Rylton had pressed his suit many times, but she had never yielded. It was always the same argument, she would not ruin *him*. But one day—only the other day, indeed—she had said something that made him know she sometimes counted on his uncle's death. She would marry him then ! She would not marry a poor man, however much she loved him. The thought that she was waiting for his uncle's death revolted him at the moment, and though he forgave her afterwards, still the thought rankled.

It hurt him, in a sense, that she should *desire* death—the death of another—to create her own content.



His mother had hinted at it only just now ! Marian feared, she said—feared to step aboard his sinking ship. Where, then, was her love, that perfect love that casteth out all fear ?

A wave of anger rushes over him as he looks at her now—smiling, fair, with large, deep, gleaming eyes. He tells himself he will know at once what it is she means—what is the worth of her love.

She is leaning towards him, a soft red rosebud crushed against her lips.

‘ Ah, yes ! It is true. I *did* know you were coming,’ says she tenderly.

She gives a hasty, an almost imperceptible glance round. Lady Rylton is often a little—just a *little*—prone to prying—especially of late ; ever since the arrival of that small impossible heiress, for example ; and then very softly she slips her hand into his.

‘ What an evening !’ says she with delicate fervour. ‘ How sweet, how perfect, Maurice !’

‘Well?’ in a rather cold, uncompromising way.

Mrs. Bethune gives him a quick glance.

‘What a tone!’ says she; ‘you frighten me!’

She laughs softly, sweetly. She draws closer to him—closer still; and, laying her cheek against his arm, rubs it lightly, caressingly, up and down.

‘Look here!’ says he quickly, catching her by both arms, and holding her a little away from him; ‘I have a question to ask you.’

‘There is always a question,’ says she, smiling still, ‘between friends and foes, then why not between—*lovers*?’

She lingers over the word, and, stooping her graceful head, runs her lips lightly across the hand that is holding her right arm.

A shiver runs through Rylton. Is she true or false? But, however it goes, how exquisite she is!

‘And now your question,’ says she;

‘how slow you are to ask it. Now *what* is it?—what—what?’

‘Shall I ask it, Marian? I have asked it too often before.’

He is holding her arms very tightly now, and his eyes are bent on hers. Once again he is under the spell of her beauty.

‘Ask—ask what you will!’ cries she. She laughs gaily, and throws back her head. The last rays of the sunlight catch her hair, and lift it to a very glory round her beautiful face. ‘Go on, go on,’ she says lightly. There is, perhaps, some defiance in her tone, but, if so, it only strengthens her for the fight. ‘I am your captive!’ She gives a little expressive downward glance at his hands, as he holds her arms. ‘Speak, my lord! and your slave answers.’ She has thrown some mockery into her tone.

‘I am not your lord,’ says Rylton. He drops her arms, and lets her go, and stands well back from her. ‘That is the last part assigned to me.’

Mrs. Bethune's gaze grows concentrated. It is fixed on him. What does he mean? What is the object of this flat rebellion—this receding from her authority? Strength is hers, as well as charm, and she comes to the front bravely.

'Now what *is* it?' asks she, creeping up to him again, and now slipping her arm around his neck. 'How have I vexed you? Who has been saying nasty little things about me? The dear mother, eh?'

'I want no one to tell me anything, but you.'

'Speak, then; did I not tell you I should answer?'

'I want an answer to one question, and one only,' says Rylton slowly.

'That is modesty itself.'

'Will you marry me?'

'Marry you?' She repeats his words almost in a whisper, her eyes on the ground, then suddenly she uplifts her graceful form, and, lazily clasping her arms behind her head, looks at him. 'Surely

we have been through this before,' says she, with a touch of reproach.

'Many times!' His lips have grown into a rather straight line. 'Still I repeat my question.'

'Am I so selfish as this in your eyes?' asks she. 'Is it thus you regard me?' Her large eyes have grown quite full of tears. 'Is my own happiness so much to me that for the sake of it I would deliberately ruin yours?'

'It would not ruin mine! Marry me, Marian, if—you love me!'

'You know I love you.' Her voice is tremulous now and her face very pale. 'But *how* can we marry? I am a beggar, and you——'

'The same!' returns he shortly. 'We are in the same boat.'

'Still, one must think.'

'And you are the one. Do you know, Marian'—he pauses, and then goes on deliberately—'I have been thinking, too, and I have come to the conclusion that

when one truly loves, one never calculates.'

'Not even for the one beloved?'

'For no one!'

'Is love, then, only selfishness incarnate?'

'I cannot answer that. It is a great mixture; but, whatever it is, it rules the world, or should rule it. It rules *me*. You tell me—you are for ever telling me—that marriage with you, who are penniless, would be my ruin, and yet I would marry you. Is *that* selfishness?'

'No; it is only folly,' says she in a low, curious tone.

Maurice regards her curiously.

'Marian,' says he quickly, impulsively, 'there are other places. If you would come abroad with me, I could carve out a fresh life for us—I could work for you, live for you, endure all things for you. Come! come!'

He holds out his hands to her.

'But why—why not wait?' exclaims she

with deep agitation. 'Your uncle—he *cannot* live for ever.'

'I detest dead men's shoes,' returns he coldly. Her last words have chilled him to his heart's core. 'And besides, my uncle has as good a life as my own.'

To this she makes no answer ; her eyes are downbent. Rylton's face is growing hard and cold.

'You refuse, then ?' says he at last.

'I refuse nothing, but——' She breaks off. 'Maurice,' cries she passionately, 'why do you talk to me like this ? What has changed you ? Your mother ? Ah, I know it ! She has set her heart on your marriage with this—this little *nobody*, and she is poisoning your mind against me. But you—*you*—you will not forsake me for her !'

'It is you who are forsaking me,' returns he violently. 'Am I nothing to you, except as a medium by which you may acquire all the luxuries that women seem ready to sell their very souls for ? Come,

Marian, rise above it all. I am a poor man, but I am young, and I can work. Marry me as I am, and for what I am in your sight, and seek a new life with me abroad.'

'It is madness,' says she, in a voice so low as to be almost inaudible. For a short, *short* minute the plan held out to her had tempted her, but something stronger than her love prevailed. She could wait—she *would*; and she is so sure of him. He is her own, her special property. Yes! she can afford to wait. Something must occur shortly to change the state of his affairs, and even if things come to the very worst—there are others. 'I tell you,' says she, 'that I will not spoil your life. Your uncle—he would be furious if you married me, and——'

Rylton put her somewhat roughly from him.

'I am tired of that old excuse,' says he, his tone even rougher than his gesture. He turns away.



‘Maurice!’ says she sharply—there is real anguish in her tone, her face has grown white as death—‘Maurice, come back.’ She holds out her arms to him. ‘Oh—darling, do not let your mother come between us! That girl—she will *make* you marry that girl. She has money, whereas I—what am I? A mere castaway on life’s sea! Yes, yes.’ She covers her face with her hands in a little paroxysm of despair. ‘Yes,’ faintly, ‘you will marry that girl.’

‘Well, why not?’ sullenly. He is as white as she is—his face is stern. ‘It she will deign to accept me. I have not so far,’ with a bitter laugh, ‘been very successful in my love affairs.’

‘Oh! *How* can you say that—and to me?’

She bursts into tears, and in a moment he has her in his arms. His beautiful darling! He soothes her, caresses her, lets her weave the bands of her fascination over him all fresh again.

It is only afterwards he remembers that through all her grief and love she had never so far forgotten herself as to promise to exile herself for his sake in a foreign land.

## CHAPTER V.

SHOWING HOW, WHEN PEOPLE DO CONGREGATE TOGETHER, MUCH KNOWLEDGE MAY BE FOUND, AND HOW THE LITTLE HOYDEN HAD SOME KIND THINGS SAID ABOUT HER.

‘GAME and set,’ cries Tita at the top of her fresh young voice, from the other end of the court. It would be useless to pretend she doesn’t *shout* it. She is elated—happy. She has won. She tears off the little soft round cap that, defiant of the sun, she wears, and flings it sky-high, catching it deftly as it descends upon the top of her dainty head, a *little* sideways. Her pretty, soft, fluffy hair, cut short, and curled all over her head by Mother Nature,

is flying a little wildly across her brows, her large gray eyes (that sometimes are so nearly black) are brilliant. Altogether she is just a little, a *very* little, pronounced in her behaviour. Her opponents, people who have come over to The Place for the day, whisper something to each other, and laugh a little. After all, they have lost—perhaps they are somewhat spiteful. Lady Rylton, sitting on the terrace above, bites her lips. What an impossible girl! and yet how rich! Things must be wrong somewhere, when Fate showers money on such a little ill-bred creature.

‘How funny she is!’ says Mrs. Chichester, who is sitting near Lady Rylton, a guest at The Place in this house-party, this last big entertainment, that is to make or mar its master. Lady Rylton had organized it, and Sir Maurice, who never contradicted her, and who had not the slightest idea of the real meaning of it, had shrugged his shoulders. After all, let her have her own way to the last. There would be enough

to pay the debts and a little over for her ; and for him, poverty, a new life, and emancipation. He is tired of his mother's rule. 'And how small !' goes on Mrs. Chichester, a tall young woman with light hair and queer eyes, whose husband is abroad with his regiment. 'Like a doll. I love dolls ; don't you, Captain Marryatt ?'

'Are *you* a doll ?' asks Captain Marryatt, who is leaning over her.

He is always leaning over her !

'I never know what I am,' says Mrs. Chichester frankly, her queer eyes growing a little queerer. 'But Miss Bolton, how delightful she is ! so natural, and Nature is always so—so——'

'Natural !' supplies Mr. Gower, who is lying on a rug watching the game below.

'Oh, get out !' says Mrs. Chichester, whose manners are not her strong point.

She is sitting on a garden-chair behind him, and she gives him a little dig in the back with her foot as she speaks.

'Don't ! I'm bad there !' says he.

‘I believe you are bad everywhere,’ says she, with a pout.

‘Then you believe wrong! My heart is a heart of gold,’ says Mr. Gower ecstatically.

‘I’d like to see it,’ says Mrs. Chichester, who is not above a flirtation even with a man whom she knows is beyond temptation; and truly Randal Gower is hard to get at!

‘Does that mean that you would gladly see me dead?’ asks he. ‘Oh, cruel woman!’

‘I’m tired of seeing you as you are, any way,’ says she, tilting her chin. ‘Why don’t you fall in love with somebody, for goodness’ sake?’

‘Well, I’m trying,’ says Mr. Gower, ‘I’m trying hard; but,’ looking at her, ‘I don’t seem to get on. You don’t encourage me, you know, and I’m very shy!’

‘There, don’t be stupid,’ says Mrs. Chichester, seeing that Marryatt is growing a little enraged. ‘We were talking of Miss Bolton. We were saying——’

‘That she was Nature’s child.’

‘Give me Nature!’ says Captain Marryatt, breaking into the *tête-à-tête* a little sulkily. ‘Nothing like it.’

‘Is that a proposal?’ demands Mr. Gower, raising himself on his elbow, and addressing him with deep interest. ‘It cannot be *Mrs.* Bolton you refer to, as she is unfortunately dead. Nature’s child, however, is still amongst us. Shall I convey your offer to her?’

‘Yes, shall he?’ asks Mrs. Chichester.

She casts a teasing glance at her admirer; a little amused light has come into her green-gray eyes.

‘I should think *you*, Randal, would be the fitting person to propose to her, considering how you haunt her footsteps day and night,’ says a strange voice.

It comes from a tall, gaunt old lady, who, with ringlets flying, advances towards the group. She is a cousin of the late Sir Maurice, and an aunt of Gower’s, from whom much is to be expected by the latter

at her death. There is therefore, as you see, a cousinship between the Gowers and the Ryltons.

‘My dear aunt, is that you?’ says Mr. Gower with enthusiasm. ‘Come and sit here ; *do*, just here *beside* me!’

He pats the rug on which he is reclining as he speaks, beckoning her warmly to it, knowing as he well does that her bones would break if she tried to bring them to so low a level.

‘Thank you, Randal, I prefer a more elevated position,’ replies she austerely.

‘Ah, you would! you would!’ says Randal, who really ought to be ashamed of himself. ‘You were meant for high places.’

He sighs loudly, and goes back to his rug.

‘Miss Gower is right,’ says Mrs. Bethune gaily, who has just arrived. ‘Why don’t *you* go in for Miss Bolton?’

‘She wouldn’t have me!’ says Gower tragically. ‘I’ve hinted all sorts of lovely things to her during the past week, but



she has been apparently blind to the brilliant prospects opened to her. It has been my unhappy lot to learn that she prefers lollipops to lovers.'

'You tried her?' asks Mrs. Chichester.

'Well, I believe I *did* do a good deal in the chocolate-cream business,' says Mr. Gower mildly.

'And she preferred the creams?'

'Oh! much, *much*!' says Gower.

'So artless of her,' says Mrs. Bethune, with a shrug. 'I do love the nineteenth-century child!'

'If you mean Miss Bolton, so do I,' says a young man who has been listening to them, and laughing here and there—a man from the Cavalry Barracks at Ashbridge. 'She's quite out - of - the - way charming.'

Mrs. Bethune looks at him—he is only a boy and easily to be subdued, and she is glad of the opportunity of giving some little play to the jealous anger that is raging within her.

‘She has a hundred thousand charming ways,’ says she, smiling, but very unpleasantly. ‘An heiress is always charming!’

‘Oh no! I didn’t look at it in that way at all,’ says the boy, reddening furiously. ‘One wouldn’t, you know—when looking at *her*.’

‘Wouldn’t one?’ says Mrs. Bethune. She is smiling at him always; but it is a fixed smile now, and even more bitter. ‘And yet one might,’ says she.

She speaks almost without knowing it. She is thinking of Rylton—might *he*?

‘I think not,’ says the boy, stammering.

It is his first lesson in the book that tells one that to praise a woman to a woman is to bring one to confusion. It is the worst manners possible.

‘I agree with you, Woodleigh,’ says Gower, who is case-hardened and doesn’t care about his manners, and who rather dislikes Mrs. Bethune. ‘She’s got lovely little ways. Have *you* noticed them?’

He looks direct at Marian.

‘No,’ says she, shaking her head, but very sweetly. ‘But, then, I’m so dull.’

‘Well, she has,’ says Gower, in quite a universally conversational tone, looking round him. He turns himself on his rug, pulls a cushion towards him, and lies down again. ‘And they’re all her own, too.’

‘What a comfort!’ says Mrs. Bethune, rather nastily.

Gower looks at her.

‘Yes, you’re right,’ says he. ‘To be original—honestly original—is the thing nowadays. Have you noticed when she laughs? Those little slender shoulders of hers actually shake.’

‘My *dear* Mr. Gower,’ says Mrs. Bethune, ‘do spare us! I’m sure you must be portraying Miss Bolton wrongly. Emotion—to betray emotion—how vulgar!’

‘I like emotion,’ says Mr. Gower calmly; ‘I’m a perfect mass of it myself. Have you noticed Miss Bolton’s laugh, Rylton?’ to Sir Maurice, who had come up a

moment ago, and had been listening to Mrs. Bethune's last remark. 'It seems to run all through her. Not an inch that doesn't seem to enjoy it.'

'Well, there aren't *many* inches,' says Sir Maurice, with an amused air.

'And the laugh itself—so gay.'

'You are an enthusiast,' says Sir Maurice, who is standing near Mrs. Bethune.

'My dear fellow, who wouldn't be, in such a cause?' says the young cavalryman, with a rather conscious laugh.

'Here she is,' says Mrs. Chichester, who is one of those people whom Nature has supplied with eyes behind and before.

Tita running up the slope at this moment like a young deer—a steep embankment that would have puzzled a good many people—puts an effectual end to the conversation. Mr. Gower graciously deigning to give her half of his rug, she sinks upon it gladly. She likes Gower.

Lady Rylton calls to her.

'Not on the grass, Tita dearest,' cries

she, in her little shrill, old-young voice. 'Come here to me, darling. Next to me on this seat. Marian,' to Mrs. Bethune, who has been sitting on the garden-chair with her, 'you can make a little room, eh?'

'A great deal,' says Marian.

She rises.

'Oh no! don't stir. Not for me,' says Tita, making a little gesture to her to re-seat herself. 'No, thank you, Lady Rylton; I shall stay here. I'm quite happy here. I like sitting on the grass.'

She makes herself a little more comfortable where she is, regardless of the honour Lady Rylton would have done her—regardless, too, of the frown with which her hostess now regards her.

Mr. Gower turns upon her a beaming countenance.

'What you really mean is,' says he, that you like sitting near *me*.'

'Indeed I do not,' says Tita indignantly.

'My dear girl, *think*. Am I to under-

stand, then, that you don't like sitting near me ?'

'Ah, that's a different thing,' says Tita, with a little side-glance at him that shows a disposition to laughter.

'You see ! you see !' says Mr. Gower triumphantly—he has a talent for teasing. 'Then you do wish to sit beside me ! And why not ?' He expands his hands amiably. 'Could you be beside a more delightful person ?'

'Maybe I could,' says Tita, with another glance.

Rylton, who is listening, laughs.

His laugh seems to sting Mrs. Bethune to her heart. She turns to him, and lets her dark eyes rest on his.

'What a little flirt !' says she contemptuously.

'Oh no ! a mere child,' returns he.

'Miss Bolton ! What an answer !' Gower is now at the height of his enjoyment. 'And after last night, too ; you *must* remember what you said to me last night.'

‘Last night?’ She is staring at him with a small surprised face—a delightful little face, as sweet as early spring. ‘What did I say to you last night?’

‘And have you forgotten?’ Mr. Gower has thrown tragedy into his voice. ‘*Already?*’ Do you mean to tell me that you don’t recollect saying to me that you preferred me to all the rest of my sex?’

‘I *never* said that!’ says Tita, with emphasis; ‘never! never! Why should I say that?’

She looks at Gower as if demanding an answer.

‘I’m not good at conundrums,’ says he. ‘Ask me another.’

‘No; I won’t,’ says she. ‘*Why?*’

Upon this Mr. Gower rolls himself over in the rug, and covers his head. It is plain that answers are not to be got out of *him*.

‘Did I say that?’ says Tita, appealing to Sir Maurice.

‘I hope not,’ returns he, laughing.  
‘Certainly I did not hear it.’

‘And certainly he didn’t either,’ says Tita with decision.

‘After that,’ says Gower, unrolling himself, ‘I shall retire from public life; I shall give myself up to’—he pauses and looks round; a favourite ladies’ paper is lying on the ground near him—‘to literature.’

He turns over on his side, and apparently becomes engrossed in it.

‘Have you been playing, Maurice?’ asks Mrs. Bethune presently.

Her tone is cold. That little speech of his to Tita, uttered some time ago, ‘I hope not,’ had angered her.

‘No,’ returns he as coldly.

He is in one of his uncertain moods with regard to her. Distrust, disbelief, a sense of hopelessness—all are troubling him.

‘What a shame, Sir Maurice!’ says Mrs. Chichester, leaning forward. As I have hinted, she would have flirted with a broom-



stick. 'And you, who are our champion player.'

'I'll play now if you will play with me,' says Sir Maurice gallantly.

'A safe answer,' looking at him with a pout, and through half-closed lids. She finds that sort of glance effective sometimes. 'You know I don't play.'

'Not *that* game,' says Mr. Gower, who never can resist a thrust.

'I thought you were reading your paper,' says Mrs. Chichester sharply. 'Come, what's in it? I don't believe,' scornfully, 'you are reading it at all.'

'I am, however,' says Mr. Gower. 'These ladies' papers are so full of information. I'm quite enthralled just now. I've got on to the Exchange and Mart business, and it's too exciting for *words*. Just listen to this: "Two dozen old tooth-brushes (in *good* preservation) would be exchanged for a gold bangle (*unscratched*). Would not be sent on approval (mind, it must not be sent *scratched*! good old

toothbrushes!) without deposit of ten shillings. Address, 'Chizzler,' office of this paper.'"

'It isn't true. I don't believe a word of it,' says Tita, making a snatch at the paper.

'My dear girl, why not? Two dozen old toothbrushes. *Old* toothbrushes, you notice. Everything old now goes for a large sum, except,' thoughtfully, 'aunts.'

He casts a lingering glance round, but providentially Miss Gower has disappeared.

'But toothbrushes! Show me that paper.'

'Do you, then, disbelieve in my word?'

'Nobody could want a toothbrush.'

'Some people want them awfully,' says Mr. Gower. 'Haven't you noticed?'

But here Sir Maurice sees it his duty to interfere.

'Miss Bolton, will you play this next set with me?' says he, coming up to Tita.

'Oh, I should *love* it!' cries she. 'You

are so good a player. Do get us some decent people to play against, though ; I hate a weak game.'

'Well, come, we'll try and manage it,' says he, amused at her enthusiasm.

They move away together.

## CHAPTER VI.

HOW GAMES WERE PLAYED, 'OF SORTS';  
AND HOW TITA WAS MUCH HARRIED,  
BUT HOW SHE BORE HERSELF VALIANTLY,  
AND HOW, NOT KNOWING OF HER VIC-  
TORIES, SHE WON ALL THROUGH.

THERE had been no question about it; it had been a walk-over. Even Lord Eshurst and Miss Staines, who are considered quite crack people at tennis in this part of the county, had not had a chance. Tita had been everywhere; she seemed to fly. Every ball caught, and every ball so well planted. Rylton had scarcely been in it, though a good player. That little thing was here and there and everywhere,

yet Rylton could not say she poached. Whatever she did, however, she *won*.

She does not throw up her cap this time—perhaps she had seen a little of that laughter before—but she claps her hands joyfully, and pats Rylton's arm afterwards in a *bon camarade* fashion that seems to amuse him. And is she tired? There is no sense of fatigue, certainly, in the way she runs up the slope again, and flings herself gracefully upon the rug beside Mr. Gower. Mr. Gower has not stirred from that rug since. He seldom stirs. Perhaps he would not be quite so stout if he did.

'You won your game?' says Margaret Knollys, bending towards Tita, with a smile.

Old Lady Eshurst is smiling at her, too.

'Oh yes; how could I help it? Sir Maurice'—with a glance at the latter as he climbs the slope in turn—'plays like an angel.'

‘Oh no ; it is you who do that,’ says he, laughing.

‘Are you an angel, Miss Bolton?’ asks Mrs. Bethune, who is standing next Rylton.

He had gone straight to her, but she had not forgiven his playing with the girl at all, and a sense of hatred towards Tita is warming her breast.

‘I don’t know,’ says Tita, with a slight grimace. It is not the answer expected. Marian had expected to see her shy, confused ; Tita, on the contrary, is looking at her with calm, inquiring eyes. ‘Do you?’ asks she.

‘I have not gone into it,’ says Mrs. Bethune, with as distinct a sneer as she can allow herself.

Mr. Gower laughs.

‘You’re good at games,’ says he to Tita.

He might have meant her powers at tennis, he might have meant *anything*.

‘That last game you are thinking of?’

‘Decidedly, the last game,’ says Gower, who laughs again immoderately.

‘I don’t see what there is to laugh at,’ says Miss Bolton, with some indignation. ‘“They laugh who win,” is an old proverb. But *you* didn’t win; you weren’t in it.’

‘I expect I never shall be,’ says Gower. ‘Yet lookers-on have their advantage ascribed to them by a pitiful Providence. They see most of the game.’

‘It is I who should laugh,’ says Tita, who has not been following him. ‘*I* won—we’—looking, with an honest desire to be just to all people, at Sir Maurice—‘*we* won.’

‘No, no; leave it in the singular,’ says Maurice, making her a little gesture of self-depreciation.

‘You seem very active,’ says Margaret kindly. ‘I watched you at golf yesterday. You liked it?’

‘Yes; there is so little else to like,’ says Tita, looking at her, ‘except my horses and my dogs.’

‘A horse is the best companion of all,’ says Mr. Woodleigh, his eyes bent on her charming little face.

‘I’m not sure, the dogs are so kind, so affectionate; they *want* one so,’ says Tita. ‘And yet a horse—oh, I *do* love my last mount—a brown mare! She’s lying up now.’

‘You ride, then?’ says Sir Maurice.

‘Ride! you bet!’ says Tita. She rolls over on the rug, and, resting on her elbows, looks up at him; Lady Rylton watching, shudders. ‘I’ve been in the saddle all my life. Just before I came here I had a real good run—my uncle’s groom had one horse, I had the other; it was over the downs. *I* won.’

She rests her chin upon her hands.

Lady Rylton’s face pales with horror. A race with a groom!

‘Your uncle must give you good mounts,’ says Mr. Woodleigh.

‘It is all he *does* give me,’ says the girl, with a pout. ‘Yes; I may ride, but that



is all. I never *see* anybody—there is nobody to see ; my uncle knows nobody.

Lady Rylton makes an effort. It is growing *too* dreadful. She turns to Mrs. Chichester.

‘Why don’t you play?’ asks she.

‘Tennis? I hate it; it destroys one’s clothes so,’ says Mrs. Chichester. ‘And those shoes, they are terrible. If I knew any girls—I never do know them, as a rule—I should beg of them not to play tennis; it is destruction so far as feet go.’

‘Fancy riding so much as that!’ says Mr. Woodleigh, who, with Sir Maurice and the others, has been listening to Tita’s stories of hunts and rides gone and done. ‘Why, how *long* have you been hunting?’

‘Ever since I was thirteen,’ says Tita.

‘Why, that is about your age now, isn’t it?’ says Gower.

‘We lived at Oakdean then,’ goes on Tita, taking, very properly, no notice of

him, 'and my father liked me to ride. My cousin was with us there, and he taught me. I rode a great deal before'—she pauses, and her lips quiver; she is evidently thinking of some grief that has entered into her young life and saddened it—'before I went to live with my uncle.'

'It was your cousin who taught you to ride, then? Is he a son of the—the uncle with whom you now live?' asks Sir Maurice, who is rather ashamed of exhibiting such interest in her.

'No, no, indeed! He is a son of my aunt's—my father's sister. She married a man in Birmingham—a sugar merchant. I did love Uncle Joe,' says Tita warmly.

'No wonder!' says Mrs. Bethune. 'I wish *I* had an uncle a sugar merchant. It does sound sweet.'

'I'm not sure that *you* would think my uncle Joe sweet!' says Miss Bolton thoughtfully. 'He wasn't good to look at. He had the biggest mouth that ever *I* saw, and his nose was little and turned

up, but I loved him. I love him now, even when he is gone. And one *does* forget, you know! He said such good things to people, and '—covering her little face with her hands, and bursting into an irrepressible laugh—'he told such funny stories!'

Lady Rylton makes a sudden movement.

'Dear Lady Eshurst, wouldn't you like to come and see the houses?' asks she.

'I am afraid I must be going home,' says old Lady Eshurst. 'It is very late; you must forgive my staying so long, but your little friend—by-the-bye, is she a friend or relation?'

'A friend!' says Lady Rylton sharply.

'Well, she is so entertaining that I could not bear to go away sooner.'

'Yes—yes; she is very charming,' says Lady Rylton, as she hurries Lady Eshurst down the steps that lead to the path below.

Good heavens! If she should hear some of Uncle Joe's funny stories! She takes

Lady Eshurst visibly in tow, and walks her out of hearing.

‘What a good seat you must have!’ says Mr. Woodleigh presently, who has been dwelling on what Tita has said about her riding.

‘Oh, pretty well! Everyone should ride,’ says Tita indifferently. ‘I despise a man who can’t conquer a horse. I,’ laughing, ‘never saw the horse that *I* couldn’t conquer.’

‘You? Look at your hands!’ says Gower, laughing.

‘Well, what’s the matter with them?’ says she. ‘My cousin, when he was riding, used to say they were made of iron.’

‘Of velvet, rather.’

‘No. He said my heart was made of that.’ She laughs gaily, and suddenly looking up at Rylton, who is looking down at her, she fixes her eyes on his. She spreads her little hands abroad, brown as berries though they are with exposure to all sorts of weather. They are small

brown hands, and very delicately shaped. 'They are not so bad after all, are they?' says she.

'They are very pretty,' smiles Rylton, returning her gaze.

Suddenly for the first time it occurs to him that she has a beauty that is all her own.

'Oh no! there is nothing pretty about me,' says Tita.

She gives a sudden shrug of her shoulders. She is still lying on the rug, her face resting on the palms of her hands. Again she lifts her eyes slowly to Rylton; it is an entirely inconsequent glance—a purely idle glance—and yet it suddenly occurs to Mrs. Bethune, watching her narrowly, that there is coquetry in it: undeveloped, certainly, but *there*. She is now a child; but later on?

Maurice is smiling back at the child as if amused. Mrs. Bethune lays her hand upon his arm—Lady Rylton has gone away with old Lady Eshurst.

‘Maurice ! there will be just time for a walk before tea,’ says she in a whisper, her beautiful face uplifted very near to his. Her eyes are full of promise.

He turns with her.

‘Sir Maurice ! Sir Maurice !’ cries Tita ; ‘remember our match at golf to-morrow !’ Sir Maurice looks back. ‘Mr. Gower and I, against you and Mrs. Bethune. You *do* remember ?’

‘Yes, and we shall win,’ says Mrs. Bethune, with a cold smile.

‘Oh no ! don’t think it. We shall beat you into a cocked hat !’ cries Tita gaily.

‘Good heavens ! how vulgar she is !’ says Mrs. Bethune.

## CHAPTER VII.

HOW THE ARGUMENT GROWS HIGHER ; AND  
HOW MARIAN LOSES HER TEMPER, AND  
HOW MARGARET OBJECTS TO THE RUIN  
OF ONE YOUNG LIFE.

‘ SHE is insufferable—intolerable !’ says Lady Rylton, almost hysterically. She is sitting in the drawing-room with Margaret and Mrs. Bethune, near one of the windows that overlook the tennis court. The guests of the afternoon have gone ; only the house-party remains, and still, in the dying daylight, the tennis balls are being tossed to and fro. Tita’s little form may be seen darting from side to side ; she is playing again with Sir Maurice.

‘She is a very young girl, who has been brought up without a mother’s care,’ says Miss Knollys, who has taken a fancy to the poor hoyden, and would defend her.

‘Her manners this afternoon! — her actions—her fatal admissions!’ says Lady Rylton, who has not forgiven that word or two about the sugar merchant.

‘She spoke only naturally. *She* saw no reason why she should not speak of——’

‘Don’t be absurd, Margaret!’ sharply. ‘You know, as well as I do, that she is detestable.’

‘I am quite glad you have formed that idea of her,’ says Miss Knollys, ‘as it leads me to hope you do not now desire to marry her to Maurice.’

After all, there are, perhaps, moments when Margaret is not as perfect as one believes her. She can’t, for example, resist this thrust.

‘Decidedly I don’t *desire* to marry her to Maurice,’ says Lady Rylton angrily. ‘I have told you that often enough, I



think ; but for all that Maurice must marry her. It is his last chance !

‘Tessie,’ says Margaret sharply, ‘if you persist in this matter, and bring it to the conclusion you have in view, do you know what will happen ? You will make your only child miserable ! I warn you of that.’ Miss Knollys’ voice is almost solemn.

‘You talk as if Maurice was the only person in the world to be made miserable,’ says Lady Rylton, leaning back in her chair and bursting into tears—at all events, it must be supposed it is tears that are going on behind the little lace fragment pressed to her eyes. ‘Am not I ten times more miserable ? I, who have to give my only son—as’ (sobbing) ‘you most admirably describe it, Margaret—to such a girl as that ! Good heavens ! What can his sufferings be to mine ?’ She wipes her eyes daintily, and sits up again. ‘You hurt me so, dear Margaret,’ she says plaintively, ‘but I’m *sure* you do not mean it.’

‘No, no, of course,’ says Miss Knollys, as civilly as she can. She is feeling a little disgusted.

‘And as for this affair—objectionable as the girl is, still one must give and take a little when one’s fortunes are at the ebb. And I will save my dearest Maurice at all risks if I can, no matter what grief it costs *me*. Who am I’—with a picturesque sigh—‘that I should interfere with the prospects of my child? And this girl! If Maurice can be persuaded to have her——’

‘My dear Tessie, what a word!’ says Margaret, rising, with a distinct frown. ‘Has he *only* to ask, then, and have?’

‘Beyond doubt,’ says Lady Rylton insolently, waving her fan to and fro, ‘if he does it in the right way. In all my experience, my dear Margaret, I have never known a woman to frown upon a man who was as handsome, as well-born, as *chic* as Maurice! Even though the man might be a—well’—smiling and

lifting her shoulders—‘it’s a rude word, but—well, a very devil!’

She looks deliberately at Margaret over her fan, who really appears in this dull light *nearly* as young as she is. The look is a cruel one, hideously cruel. Even Marian Bethune, whose bowels of compassion are extraordinarily small, changes colour, and lets her red-brown eyes rest on the small woman lounging in the deep chair with a rather murderous gaze.

Yet Lady Rylton smiles on, enjoying the changes in Margaret’s face. It is a terrible smile, coming from so fragile a creature.

Margaret’s face has grown white, but she answers coldly and with deliberation. All that past horrible time—her lover, his unworthiness, his desertion—all her young, *young* life lies once more massacred before her.

‘The women who give in to such fascination, such mere outward charms, are fools!’ says she with a strength that adorns her.

‘Oh, come! Come now, dearest Margaret,’ says her aunt, with the gayest of little laughs, ‘would you call *yourself* a fool? Why, remember, your own dear Harold was——’

‘Pray spare me!’ says Miss Knollys, in so cold, so haughty, so commanding a tone, that even Lady Rylton sinks beneath it. She makes an effort to sustain her position and laughs lightly, but for all that she lets her last sentence remain a fragment.

‘You think Maurice will propose to this Miss Bolton?’ says Marian Bethune, leaning forward. There is something sarcastic in her smile.

‘He must. It is detestable, of course. One would like a girl in his own rank, but there are so few of them with money, and when there is one, her people want her to marry a Duke or a foreign Prince—so tiresome of them!’

‘It is all such folly,’ says Margaret, knitting her brows.

‘Utter folly,’ says Lady Rylton. ‘That is what makes it so wise! It would be folly to marry a satyr—satyrs are horrid—but if the satyr had *millions*! Oh, the wisdom of it!’

‘You go too far!’ says Margaret. ‘Money is not everything.’

‘And Maurice is not a satyr,’ says Mrs. Bethune, a trifle unwisely. She has been watching the players on the ground below. Lady Rylton looks at her.

‘Of course *you* object to it,’ says she.

‘I!’ says Marian. ‘Why should I object to it? I talk of marriage only in the abstract.’

‘I am glad of that!’ Lady Rylton’s eyes are still fixed on hers. ‘This will be a veritable marriage, I assure you; I have set my mind on it. It is terrible to contemplate, but one must give way sometimes; yet the thought of throwing that girl into the arms of darling Maurice——’

She breaks off, evidently overcome, yet behind the cobweb she presses to her cheeks she has an eye on Marian.

‘I don’t think Maurice’s arms could hold her,’ says Mrs. Bethune, with a low laugh. It is a strange laugh. Lady Rylton’s glance grows keener. ‘Such a mere doll of a thing. A mite!’ She laughs again, but this time (having caught Lady Rylton’s concentrated gaze) in a very ordinary manner—the passion, the anger has died out of it.

‘Yes, she’s a mere mite,’ says Lady Rylton. ‘She is positively trivial! She is in effect a perfect idiot in some ways. You know I have tried to impress her—to show her that she is not altogether below our level—as she certainly *is*—but she has refused to see my kindness. She—she’s very fatiguing,’ says Lady Rylton, with a long-suffering sigh. ‘But one gets accustomed to grievances. This girl, just because she is hateful to me, is the one I must take into my bosom.’

She is going to give her fortune to Maurice !

‘ And Maurice ? ’ asks Margaret.

‘ Is going to take it,’ returns his mother airily. ‘ And is going to give her, what she has never had—*a name !* ’

‘ A cruel compact,’ says Margaret slowly, but with decision. ‘ I think this marriage should not be so much as thought of ! That child ! and Maurice, who cares nothing for her. Marian’—Miss Knollys turns suddenly to Marian, who has withdrawn behind the curtains, as if determined to have nothing to say further to the discussion—‘ Marian, come here. Say you think Maurice should not marry this silly child—this baby.’

‘ Oh ! as for me,’ says Mrs. Bethune, coming out from behind the curtains, her face a little pale, ‘ what is my weight in this matter ? Nothing ! nothing ! Let Maurice marry as he will.’

‘ *As he will !* ’ Lady Rylton repeats her words, and, rising, comes towards her.

‘Why don’t you answer?’ says she. ‘We want your answer. Give it!’

‘I have no answer,’ says Mrs. Bethune slowly. ‘Why should he not marry Miss Bolton?—and again, why should he? Marriage, as we have been told all our lives, is but a lottery—they should have said a mockery,’ with a little bitter smile. ‘One could have understood that.’

‘Then you advise Maurice to marry this girl?’ asks Lady Rylton eagerly.

‘Oh, no, no! I advise nothing,’ says Marian, with a little wave of her arms.

‘But why?’ demands Lady Rylton angrily.

She had depended upon Marian to support her against Margaret.

‘Simply because I won’t,’ says Mrs. Bethune, her strange eyes beginning to blaze.

‘Because you daren’t?’ questions Lady Rylton, with a sneer.

‘I don’t understand you,’ says Marian coldly.



‘Don’t you?’ Lady Rylton’s soft, little, fair face grows diabolical. ‘Then let me explain.’ Margaret makes a movement towards her, but she waves her back. ‘Pray let me explain, Margaret. Our dear Marian is so intensely dull that she wants a word in season. We all know why she objects to a marriage of any sort. She made a fiasco of her own first marriage, and now hopes——’

She would have continued her cruel speech but that Mrs. Bethune, who has risen, breaks into it. She comes forward in a wild, tempestuous fashion, her eyes afire, her nostrils dilated! Her beautiful red hair seems alight as she descends upon Lady Rylton.

‘And that marriage!’ says she, in a suffocating tone. ‘Who made it? *Who?*’ She looks like a fury. There is a hatred, an almost murderous hatred, in the glance she casts at the little, languid, pretty woman before her, who looks back at her with uplifted shoulders, and an all-round

air of surprise and disapprobation. ‘*You* to taunt me!’ says she, in a low, condensed tone. ‘*You*, who hurried, who *forced* me into a marriage with a man I detested! You, who gave me to understand, when I resisted, that I had no place on this big earth except a pauper’s place—a place in a workhouse!’

She stands tall, grave, magnificent, in her fury before Lady Rylton, who, in spite of the courage born of want of feeling, now shrinks from her as if affrighted.

‘If you persist in going on like this,’ says she, pressing her smelling-bottle to her nose, ‘I must ask you to go away—to go at once. I hate scenes. You *must* go!’

‘I went away once,’ says Mrs. Bethune, standing pale and cold before her, ‘at your command—I went to the home of the man you selected for me. What devil’s life I led with him you may guess at. *You* knew him, I did not. I was seventeen then.’ She pauses; the breath she draws

seems to rive her body in twain. 'I came back——' she says presently.

'A widow?'

'A widow—*thank God!*'

A silence follows; something of tragedy seems to have fallen into the air—with that young lovely creature standing there, upright, passionate, her arms clasped behind her head, as the heroine of it. The sunlight from the dying day lights up the red, rich beauty of her hair, the deadly pallor of her skin. Through it all the sound of the tennis-balls from below, as they hurry to and fro through the air, can be heard. Perhaps it reaches her. She flings herself suddenly into a chair, and bursts out laughing.

'Let us come back to common-sense,' cries she. 'What were we talking of? The marriage of Maurice to this little plebeian—this little female Cræsus. Well, what of the argument—what?'

Her manner is a little excited.

'I, for one, object to the marriage,' says

Margaret distinctly. 'The child is too young and too rich! She should be given a chance; she should not be coerced and drawn into a mesh, as it were, without her knowledge.'

'A mesh? Do you call a marriage with my son a mesh?' asks Lady Rylton angrily. 'He of one of the oldest families in England, and she a nobody!'

'There is no such thing as a nobody,' says Miss Knollys calmly. 'This girl has intellect, mind, a *soul*! She has even money! She *must* be considered.'

'She has no birth!' says Lady Rylton. 'If you are going in for Socialistic principles, Margaret, pray do not expect *me* to follow you. I despise folly of that sort.'

'I am not a Socialist,' says Margaret slowly, 'and yet why cannot this child be accepted as one of ourselves? Where is the great difference? You object to her marrying your son, yet you *want* to marry her to your son. How do you reconcile

it? Surely you are more of a Socialist than I am. You would put the son of a baronet and the daughter of heaven knows who on an equality.'

'Never!' says Lady Rylton. 'You don't understand. She will always be just as she is, and Maurice——'

'And their children?' asks Margaret.

Here Mrs. Bethune springs to her feet.

'Good heavens! Margaret, have you not gone far enough?' says she. If her face had been pale before, it is livid now. 'Why, this marriage—this marriage'—she beats her hand upon a table near her—'one would think it was a fact accomplished!'

'I was only saying,' says Miss Knollys, looking with a gentle glance at Marian, 'that if Maurice *were* to marry this girl——'

'It would be an honour to her,' interrupts Lady Rylton hotly.

'It would be a degradation to him,' says Margaret coldly. 'He does not love her.'

She might have said more, but that suddenly Marian Bethune stops her. The latter, who is leaning against the curtains of the window, breaks into a wild little laugh.

‘Love—what is love?’ cries she. ‘Oh, foolish Margaret! Do not listen to her, Tessie, do not listen.’

She folds the soft silken curtains round, her slender figure, and, hidden therein, still laughs aloud with a wild passion of mirth.

‘It is you who are foolish,’ cries Margaret, with some agitation.

‘I?’ She lets the curtains go; they fall in a sweep behind her. She looks out at Margaret, still laughing. Her face is like ashes. ‘You speak too strongly,’ says she.

‘Do *you* think I could speak too strongly?’ asks Margaret, looking intently at her. It is a questioning glance. ‘You! Do *you* think Maurice ought to ask this poor, ignorant girl to marry him? Do *you* advise him to take this step?’

‘Why, it appears he must take some step,’ says Marian. ‘Why not this?’

Margaret goes close to her and speaks in so low a tone that Lady Rylton cannot hear her.

‘His honour, is that nothing to you?’ says she.

‘To me? What have I got to do with his honour?’ says Mrs. Bethune, with a little expressive gesture.

‘Oh, Marian!’ says Miss Knollys.

She half turns away as if in disgust, but Marian follows her and catches her sleeve.

‘You mean——’ says she.

‘Must I explain? With his heart full of you, do you think he should marry this girl?’

‘Oh, *his* heart!’ says Mrs. Bethune. ‘Has he a heart? Dear Margaret, don’t be an enthusiast; be like everybody else. It is so much more comfortable.’

‘You can put it off like this,’ says Miss Knollys in a low tone. ‘It is very simple; but you should think. I have always

thought you—you liked Maurice, that you were a—a friend of his. Save him from this. Don't let him marry this child.'

'I don't think he will marry a child!' says Mrs. Bethune, laughing.

'You mean——'

'I mean nothing at all—nothing, really,' says Marian. 'But that baby! My dear Margaret, how impossible!'



## CHAPTER VIII.

HOW A STORM RAGED ; AND HOW, WHEN A  
MAN AND WOMAN MET FACE TO FACE,  
THE VICTORY—FOR A WONDER—WENT TO  
THE MAN.

THERE has been a second scene between Lady Rylton and Sir Maurice—this time a terrible scene. She had sent for him directly after dinner, and had almost commanded him to marry Miss Bolton. She had been very bitter in her anger, and had said strange things of Marian. Sir Maurice had come off triumphant, certainly, if greatly injured, and with his heart on fire. He had, at all events, sworn he would not marry the little Bolton girl.

Those perpetual insinuations ! What had his mother meant by saying that Marian was laying herself out to catch Lord Dunkerton, an old baron in the neighbourhood, with some money and a damaged reputation ? That could not be true—he would not believe it. That old beast ! Marian would not so much as look at him. And yet—had she not been very civil to him at that ball last week ?

Coming out from his mother's boudoir, a perfect storm of fury in his heart, he finds himself face to face with Marian. Something in his face warns her. She would have gone by him with a light word or two, but, catching her by the wrist, he draws her into a room on his left.

‘ You have had another quarrel with your mother,’ says she sympathetically, ignoring the anger blazing in his eyes. ‘ About that silly girl ?’

‘ No. About you !’

His tone is short—almost violent.

‘ About me ?’

She changes colour.

‘Yes, you. She accuses you of encouraging that wretched old man, Dunkerton. Do you *hear*? Speak! Is it true?’

‘This is madness!’ says Marian, throwing out her hands. ‘How *could* you believe such folly? That old man! Why will you give ear to such gossip?’

‘Put an end to it, then,’ says he savagely.

‘I? How can I put an end to it?’

‘By marrying *me*!’

He stands opposite to her, almost compelling her gaze in return. Mrs. Bethune gives it fearlessly.

‘Maurice dearest, you are excited now. Your mother—she is *so* irritating. I know her. Marriage, as we now stand, would mean quite dreadful things. Do be reasonable!’

‘You talk of reason,’ says he passionately. ‘Does love reason? No! I will hear your last word now.’

‘Are you condemning me, then, to death?’ asks she, smiling delicately, and

laying two large but delicate hands upon his arms.

He shakes her off.

‘Answer me. Will you marry me, or will you not?’

‘This is too sudden, Maurice!’

A little fire is kindling in her own eyes; she had objected to that last repulsion.

‘Sudden! After all these months!’ He pauses. ‘Is it to be Dunkerton or me?’ asks he violently.

‘Please do not bring Lord Dunkerton into this discussion,’ says she coldly.

‘I certainly shall.’

‘You mean that I——’

‘Have encouraged him. So I hear, at all events, and—there are things I remember.’

‘For the matter of that,’ says she, throwing up her beautiful head, ‘there are things I remember too! You—you dare to come here and accuse *me* of falsity when I have watched you all day making steady court to that wretched little plebeian, playing tennis with her all the day long, and

far into the evening! No! I may have said half a dozen words to Lord Dunkerton, but you—how many half-dozen words have you said to Miss Bolton? Come, answer me that, as we seem bent on riddles.'

'All this is as nothing,' says Rylton. 'You know, as well as I do, that Miss Bolton has not a thought of mine! I want only one thing, the assurance that you love me, and I put it at marriage. Will you link your fate with mine, low down though it is at present? If you will, Marian'—he comes closer to her and lays his hands upon her shoulders, and gazes at her with eyes full filled with honest love—'I shall work for you to the last day of my life. If you will not——'

He pauses—he looks at her—he waits. But no answer comes from her.

'Marian, take courage,' says he softly—very softly. 'My darling, is money everything?'

She suddenly leans back from him, and looks fair in his eyes.

‘It is, it is,’ says she hoarsely. ‘I *can’t* again go through what I suffered before. Wait, *do* wait—something—something will happen——’

‘You refuse me?’ says he, in a lifeless tone.

‘Not that. Don’t speak like that. Don’t leave me, Maurice.’

‘It is our last hour,’ says he deliberately. ‘Be sure of that. If money is so much to you—if money counts so far beyond all that a man can give you of his heart and soul—then take it.’

‘And you,’ says she, ‘are you not seeking money, too? This girl, this little *fool*; your mother has led you to think of her. You will marry her!’

‘I will marry you,’ says he coldly, ‘if you will marry me.’

‘I have told you that it is impossible’—she draws a deep breath—‘at present.’

‘You will not trust me, then, to make a fortune for you?’

‘A fortune! It takes so *long* to make;

and,' smiling, and drawing nearer to him, and suddenly flinging her arms around his neck, 'are we not happy as we are?'

'No.' He loosens her arms lightly, and, still holding them, looks at her. How fair she is, how desirable! 'Marian,' says he hoarsely, 'think! It is indeed my last word. Will you trust yourself to me as things are, or will you reject me? Marian, say you will marry me as I now am—poor, ruined.'

He holds her, gazing at her despairingly. She would have spoken, perhaps, but no words come to her; no words to soften her grim determination. She *will* not marry him poor—and yet she loves him.

Rylton, with a stifled oath, pushes her from him.

'This is the end,' says he.

He goes to the door.

'Maurice!' says she faintly.

He turns.

'Well, will you marry me to-morrow?' asks he mockingly.

‘No. But——’

‘There is no time for “buts,”’ says he.

He opens the door and closes it sharply behind him.

Mrs. Bethune flings herself back into a chair, and presses her handkerchief to her face.

‘Oh, it is nothing, nothing,’ says she presently. She gets up, and, standing before a glass, arranges her hair and presses her eyebrows into shape. ‘He gets impatient, that is all. He will never be able to live without me. As for that absurd child, Maurice would not look at *her*. No, I am sure of him, quite, quite sure; to-morrow he will come back to me, repentant.’



## CHAPTER IX.

HOW MAURICE PLACES HIS LIFE IN THE  
HANDS OF THE HOYDEN, AND HOW SHE  
TELLS HIM MANY THINGS, AND DESIRES  
MANY THINGS OF HIM.

MAURICE had said it was his last word. He goes straight from Marian Bethune to one of the reception-rooms, called the lesser ballroom, where some dancing is going on. His face is a little white, but beyond that he betrays no emotion whatever. He feels even surprised at himself. Has he lost all feeling? Passing Randal Gower he whispers a gay word or two to him. He feels in brilliant spirits.

Tita Bolton is dancing, but when her dance comes to an end he goes to her and

asks her for the next. Yes; he can have it. She dances like a little fairy, and when the waltz is at an end he goes with her, half mechanically, towards the conservatory at the end of the room.

He is calm now, quite calm; the chatter of this child has soothed him. It had been a pleasure to dance with her, to laugh when she laughed, to listen to her nonsense. As he walks with her towards the flowers, he tells himself he is not in the least unhappy, though always quite close to him, at his side, someone seems to be whispering :

‘It is all over! it is all over!’

Well, so much the better. She has fooled him too long.

The conservatory at the end of the lesser ballroom leads on to the balcony outside, and at the end of that is another and larger conservatory, connected with the drawing-room. Towards this he would have led her, but Tita, in the middle of the balcony, stops short.

‘ But I want to dance,’ says she.

That far-off house, full of flowers, seems very much removed from the music.

‘ You have been playing tennis all day,’ says Rylton. ‘ You must be tired. It is bad for you to fatigue yourself so much. You have had enough dancing for awhile. Come and sit with me. I, too, am tired.’

‘ Well, for awhile,’ says she reluctantly.

It is with evident regret that she takes every step that leads her away from the dancing-room.

The larger conservatory is but dimly lit with lamps covered with pale pink shades. The soft musical tinkling of a fountain, hidden somewhere amongst the flowering shrubs, adds a delicious sense of coolness to the air. The delicate perfume of heliotrope mingles with the breath of the roses, yellow and red and amber, that, standing in their pots, nod their heads drowsily. The begonias, too, seem half dead with sleep. The drawing - room beyond is deserted.

‘Now, is not this worth a moment’s contemplation?’ says Rylton, pressing her gently into a deep lounging chair that seems to swallow up her little figure. ‘It has its own charm, hasn’t it?’

He has flung himself into another chair beside her, and is beginning to wonder if he might have a cigarette. He might almost have believed himself content, but for that hateful, monotonous voice at his ear.

‘Oh, it *is* pretty,’ says Tita, glancing round her. ‘It is lovely. It reminds me of Oakdean.’

‘Oakdean?’

‘My old home,’ says she softly—‘where I lived with my father.’

‘Ah, tell me something of your life,’ says Rylton kindly.

No idea of making himself charming to her is in his thoughts. He has, indeed, but one idea, and that is to encourage her to talk, so that he himself may enjoy the bliss of silence.

‘There is nothing,’ says she quickly. ‘It has been a stupid life. I was very happy at Oakdean, when,’ hesitating, ‘papa was alive; but now I have to live at Rickfort, with Uncle George, and,’ simply, ‘I’m not happy.’

‘What’s the matter with Rickfort?’

‘Nothing. It’s Uncle George that there is something the matter with. Rickfort is my house, too, but I hate it; it is so gloomy. I’m sure,’ with a shrug of her shoulders, ‘Uncle George might have it, and welcome, if only he wouldn’t ask *me* to live there with him.’

‘Uncle George seems to make a poor show,’ says Rylton.

‘He’s horrid!’ says Miss Bolton, without reservation. ‘He’s a *beast*! He hates me, and I hate him.’

‘Oh no!’ says Rylton, roused a little.

The child’s face is so earnest. He feels a little amused, and somewhat surprised. She seems the last person in the world capable of hatred.

‘Yes, I do,’ says she, nodding her delightful little head, ‘and he knows it. People say a lot about family resemblances, but it seems wicked to think Uncle George is papa’s brother. For my part,’ recklessly, ‘I don’t believe it.’

‘Perhaps he’s a changeling,’ says Sir Maurice.

‘Oh, don’t be silly,’ says Miss Bolton. ‘Now, listen to this.’ She leans forward, her elbows on her knees, her eyes glistening with wrath. ‘I had a terrier, a *lovely* one, and she had six puppies, and, would you believe it! he drowned every one of them—said they were ill-bred, or something. And they weren’t, they *couldn’t* have been; they were perfectly beautiful, and my darling Scrub fretted herself nearly to death after them. I begged almost on my knees that he would leave her *one*, and he wouldn’t.’ Her eyes are now full of tears. ‘He is a beast!’ says she. This last word seems almost comic, coming from her pretty childish lips.

‘Well, but you see,’ says Rylton, ‘some men pride themselves on the pedigree of their dogs, and perhaps your uncle——’

‘Oh, if you are going to defend him!’ says she, rising with a stiff little air.

‘I’m not—I’m not, indeed,’ says Rylton. ‘Nothing could excuse his refusing you that one puppy. But in other ways he is not unkind to you?’

‘Yes, he is; he won’t let me go anywhere.’

‘He has let you come here.’

‘Just because your mother is *Lady* Rylton!’ says the girl, with infinite scorn. She looks straight at him. ‘My uncle is ashamed because we are nobodies—because his father earned his money by trade. He hates everyone because of that. My father,’ proudly, ‘was above it all.’

‘I think I should like to have known your father,’ says Rylton, admiring the pride in her gray eyes.

‘It would have done you good,’ returns

she thoughtfully. She pauses, as if still thinking, and then, 'As for me, I have not been good at all since I lost him.'

'One can see that,' says Rylton. 'Crime sits rampant in your eyes.'

At this she laughs too; but presently she stops short, and turns to him.

'It is all very well for you to laugh!' says she ruefully. 'You have not to go home next week to live again with Uncle George!'

'I begin to hate Uncle George!' says Rylton. 'You see how you are demoralizing me! But, surely, if you cannot live in peace with him, there must be others—other relations—who would be glad to chaperone you!'

'No,' says the girl, shaking her head sadly. 'For one thing, I have *no* relations—at least, none who could look after me; and, for another, by my father's will, I must stay with Uncle George until my marriage.'

'Until your marriage!' Sir Maurice



laughs. 'Forgive me! I should not have laughed,' says he, 'especially as your emancipation seems a long way off.'

Really, looking at her in the subdued lights of those pink lamps, she seems a mere baby.

'I don't see why it *should* be so far off,' says Tita, evidently affronted. 'Lots of girls get married at seventeen; I've heard of people who were married at sixteen! But *they* must have been fools. No, I don't want to be married, though, if I did, I should be able to get rid of Uncle George. But what I should like to do would be to run away!'

'Where?' asks Rylton, rather abominably, it must be confessed.

'Oh, I don't know,' confusedly. 'I haven't thought it out.'

'Well, *don't*,' says he kindly.

'That is what everyone would say,' impatiently. 'In the meantime, I *cannot* go on living with my uncle. No; I can't.' She leans back, and, flinging her arms

behind her neck, looks with a little laughing pout at Rylton. 'Some day I shall do something dreadful,' says she.

She is charming, posing so. Rylton looks at her. How pretty she is! How guileless! How far removed from worldly considerations! His affair with Marian is at an end. Never to be renewed! That is settled. He had given her a last word, and she had spurned it.

After all, why should he *not* marry this charming child? The marriage would please his mother, and restore the old name to something of its ancient grandeur. And as for himself—why, it matters nothing to him.

'It is all over. It is all over.'

Again that teasing voice in his ear.

Well, if it *is* all over, so much to the good. But as for this girl sitting near him, if he must take her to be his wife, it shall be at least in good faith. She shall know all. Probably she will refuse him. For one thing, because he is ten years

older than she is—a century in the eyes of a child of seventeen; and, for another, because she may not like him at all. For all he knows, she may hate him as she hates her uncle George, in certain ways.

However it is, he will tell her that he has no love for her. It shall be all fair and above-board between them. He can give her a title. She can give him money, without which the title would be useless.

On the instant he makes up his mind to risk the proposal. In all probability she will say ‘No’ to it. But if not—if she accepts him—he swears to himself he will be true to her.

‘The most dreadful thing you could do,’ says he, ‘would be to marry a man who did not love you.’

‘Eh?’ says she.

She seems surprised.

‘To marry a man, then, with whom you weren’t in love!’

‘Oh, *that*, that’s nothing,’ says she grandly. ‘I’d do a great deal more than

*that* to get away from my uncle. But'—sorrowfully—'nobody's asked me.'

She says it so innocently, so sweetly, that Rylton's heart grows cold within him. To ask her! To tempt this child——

'But,' says he, looking away from her religiously, 'would you marry a man who was not in love with *you* ?'

'Not in love with me?'

'No. Not actually in love, but who admired—liked you?'

'But a man who wasn't in love with me wouldn't want to marry me,' says Tita. 'At least, that's what the novels say.'

'He might,' says Rylton deliberately. He leans forward. 'Will you marry *me* ?'

He almost laughs aloud as he makes his extraordinary proposal. If it fails, as it certainly *must*, he will throw up the remnant of his life here and go abroad. And, at all events, he can so far satisfy his mother as to assure her that he had placed his all at this little heiress's feet.

'You! You!' says she.

She stares at him.

‘Even me! You said a moment ago that no man would ask you to marry him for any reason less than love; but I—I am not in love with you, and yet I ask you to marry me.’

He pauses here, shocked at his own words, his brutal audacity.

‘But why?’ asks the girl slowly.

She is looking at him, deep inquiry and wonder in her great gray eyes.

‘Because I am poor and you are rich,’ says he honestly. ‘Your money could redeem this old place, and I could give you a title—a small thing, no doubt.’

‘You could take me away from my uncle,’ says the girl thoughtfully. There is silence for awhile, and then—‘I should be able to do as I liked,’ says she, as if communing with herself.

‘That certainly,’ says Rylton, who feels as if all things should be allowed her at this juncture, considering how little it is in his power to allow.

‘And you?’ She looks up at him. ‘*You* could do as you liked, too!’

‘Thank you!’ says Rylton.

He smiles in spite of himself, but the girl continues very grave.

‘You say you have nothing,’ says she, ‘but this house?’

‘It is useless arguing about it,’ returns Rylton; ‘this house will go shortly with all the rest. For myself, I don’t care much really, but my mother—she would feel it. That’s why I say you can help us, if you will.’

‘I should like to help *you*!’ says Tita, still very slowly.

She lays a stress upon the word ‘you.’

‘Well, will you trust yourself to me?’

‘Trust myself!’

‘Will you marry me? Consider how it is. I lay it all before you. I am not in love with you, and I have not a penny in the world. Literally, I have nothing.’

‘You have a mother,’ says Tita. ‘I,’ pathetically, ‘have nothing.’ It is plain to

him that she had set great store by her dead father. 'I have nohting, really. But you say this house must go?'

'Not if you will help me to keep it.'

'I should not like to live here,' says Tita, with some haste. And then in a low tone, 'Your mother would live here?'

'Yes, certainly.'

'Well, and I—I have been very unhappy with Uncle George,' says she. Her air is so naïve that Rylton suddenly busrts out laughing. After all, the last thing he would desire either would be to live here with his mother.

'You would not have to make this place your home,' says he. It had never been a home to him since his father's death. 'You shall command me in this matter; I shall live at Oakdean if that is your desire.' Indeed, it seems to him it would be a great relief to get away from the Hall, from his mother, from——

'To live at Oakdean!' The girl's face grows transfigured. She stares at him

as if hardly seeing him, however; her thoughts have carried her back to past delights in which he has had no part. 'To live there again!' She sighs quickly, excitedly. 'You haven't seen it, you don't *know*,' says she. 'But it is the most beautiful place on earth.' She puts out her hand and lays it on his. 'If I marry you, will you promise that I shall live at Oakdean?'

'If you will do me the honour to marry me, you shall live just where you like,' returns he. Indeed, to him it is now a matter of indifference where life may be dragged out to its weary end. But Tita fails to see the apathy in his manner.

'Then it is settled,' cries she joyfully. She claps her hands. 'Oh, how *good* of you!' says she. 'What a blessing I came here! Fancy getting rid of Uncle George and getting back to Oakdean all in one stroke!' Suddenly she looks round at him; there is almost terror in her gaze. 'You are sure you *mean* it?' says she.



‘I mean it. But, Tita’—he takes one of her hands and holds it between his own, and regards her with some anxiety—‘have you thought it all out? I have told you the truth, you know. I have told you that I am not in love with you.’

‘In love with me! I’m sure I hope not,’ says Tita with a disgusted air. ‘Don’t put yourself out about that. I should hate you if you were in love with me. Fancy a person following me about always, and saying silly things to me, and perhaps wanting to kiss me! You,’ anxiously looking at him with searching eyes, ‘you wouldn’t want to kiss me, would you?’

She looks so pretty as she puts this startling question, that Rylton loses himself a little.

‘I don’t know.’

‘Then you had *better* know, and at *once*,’ says Miss Bolton, with decision.

The whole affair seems to be trembling in the balance. A sense of amusement

has most unfortunately seized on Rylton, and is shaking him to his very heart's core. To marry a girl who even objected to a kiss! It sounds like a French play. He subdues his untimely mirth by an effort, and says gravely, 'How can I promise you that I shall never want to kiss you? I may grow very fond of you in time, and you—but, of course, that is far more improbable—may grow very fond of me.'

'Even so,' begins she hotly. She pauses, however, as if some thought had struck her. 'Well, let it stay so,' says she. 'If ever I do grow to like you as much as you fancy, why, then you may kiss me—sometimes.'

'That's a bargain,' says he.

Again he suppresses a desire to laugh. It seems to him that she is intensely interesting in some way.

'In the meantime,' says he, with quite a polite air, 'may I not kiss you now?'

'No!' says she. It is the lightest

monosyllable, but fraught with much energy. She tilts the shoulder nearest to him, and peeps at him over it, with a half-merry little air.

She sets Rylton's mind at work. Is she only a silly charming child, or an embryo flirt of the first water? Whatever she is, at all events, she is very new, very fresh—an innovation! He continues to look at her.

‘Really no?’ questions he.

She nods her head.

‘And yet you have said “Yes” to everything else?’

She nods her head again. She nods it even twice.

‘Yes, I shall marry you,’ says she.

‘I may tell my mother?’

Miss Bolton sits up. A little troubled expression grows within her eyes.

‘Oh! must you?’ cries she. ‘She *will* be mad. She won’t let you marry me—I know she won’t. She—hates me.’

‘My dear child, why?’ Rylton’s tone is

shocked. The very truth in her declaration makes it the more shocking. And how does she know? His mother has been sweetness itself to her *before* the curtain.

‘Never mind, I know,’ says Tita. ‘I feel things. They come to me. I don’t blame her. I’m sure I’m often horrid. I know that, when I look at other people. When I look at——’

She pauses.

‘Look at whom?’

‘At your cousin.’

‘My cousin!’

‘Yes! You love her, don’t you?’

‘Love her!’ He has turned suddenly as pale as death. ‘What do you mean?’ asks he in a low voice.

‘I love her, any way,’ says Tita. ‘I think Miss Knollys is the nicest person in all the world.’

‘Oh, Margaret?’ says he. He says it involuntarily. The relief is so great that it compels him to give himself away.

‘Why, who else?’ says Tita. ‘Who did *you* think I meant?’

‘Who *could* I think?’ says he, recovering. ‘Even now I am surprised. Margaret, though very superior in most ways, is not always beloved.’

‘But you love her?’

‘Oh yes, *I* do!’

‘I am glad of that,’ says Tita. ‘Because I love her more than anyone I know. And I have been thinking’—she looks at him quickly—‘I have been thinking that’—nervously—‘that when I marry you, Miss Knollys will be my cousin, too, in a sort of way, and that perhaps she will let me call her by her name. Do you,’ anxiously, ‘think she will?’

‘I know she will.’ His answer is terse. He has barely yet recovered from the shock she had innocently given him.

‘And your mother?’ asks she, going back to the first question. ‘Do you think she will like you to marry me? Oh, do persuade her!’

‘Make no mistake about my mother, Tita; she will receive you with open arms.’ He feels as if he were lying when he says this, yet is it not the truth? ‘She will be glad to receive you as a daughter.’

‘Will she? She doesn’t look like it,’ says Tita, ‘not sometimes when I—*look back at her!*’

She rises, and makes a step towards the door of the conservatory that will lead her to the balcony, and so back to the dancing-room.

‘Tita, bear with my mother,’ says he gently, and in a low voice.

The girl turns to him, her whole young, generous heart in her voice. ‘Oh, I shall! I shall indeed!’

They traverse the long balcony in silence. The moon is flooding it with brilliant light. Here and there are groups in twos and threes—the twos are most popular. Just as they come to the entrance to the dancing-room, an alcove

now deserted, Tita stops short and looks up at him.

‘You have promised to be kind to me!’ says she, her voice trembling. For the first time the solemnity of this marriage arrangement of hers seems to have dawned upon her.

‘I have,’ says Rylton earnestly.

‘I am often very troublesome,’ says the poor child. ‘Uncle George says so. But you——’ She hesitates, looking at him always. Her gaze is intense. He feels as if she is watching him, taking his mental temperature, as it were.

‘Be kind to me in turn, Tita,’ says he. ‘Don’t mistrust me. Try to *know* that I like you.’

‘I wish,’ says she, a little forlornly, ‘that you could be fond of me. I’m—you don’t know it—nobody knows it—but I’m often very lonely. I’ve been lonely all the time since pappy died.’

‘You shall never be lonely again,’ says Rylton. ‘I am your friend from this

hour—your friend for ever.’ He is touched to his very heart by her words and her small face. He stoops over her, and in spite of all that has been said against kissing, presses his lips to her soft cheek!

‘Ah! you are kind. I *do* like you,’ says she, gazing at him with earnest eyes. ‘Yes, I know I shall be happy with you.’ She is evidently comparing him most favourably with Uncle George. ‘And you will be fond of me, won’t you? You will be good to me?’

‘I will, so help me God!’ says Rylton very solemnly.

To her it seems an oath of allegiance—kindly, tender, reassuring. To him it is a solemn abjuration of all his devotion to—the other.



## CHAPTER X.

HOW MAURICE GIVES WAY TO TEMPER, AND  
HOW LADY RYLTON PLANTS A SHAFT OR  
TWO. AND HOW MARGARET SAYS A WORD  
IN SEASON, AND HOW IN RETURN COLONEL  
NEILSON SAYS A WORD TO HER.

MAURICE goes straight to his mother's room, not from a sense of duty, but a desire to clinch the matter finally. Lady Rylton would be the last person to permit backsliding where her own interests were concerned, and perhaps—— He does not exactly say it to himself in so many words, but he feels a certain dread of the moment when he shall be alone—a prey to thought. What if he should regret the move he had taken, to the extent of want-

ing it undone? His step grows quicker as he approaches his mother's room. His interview with her is of the slightest—a bare declaration of the fact. She would have fallen upon his neck in the exuberance of her triumph and her satisfaction, but he coldly repulses her.

‘My dear mother, why such enthusiasm over my engagement to a girl of whom you distinctly disapprove?’

‘Disapprove! Of Tita! Dearest Maurice, what an idea!’

‘We won't go into it,’ says Maurice, with a gesture of ill-suppressed disgust. ‘I know your opinion of her. I beg to say, however, I do not share it. Badly as I shall come out of this transaction, I should like you to remember that I both admire and like Miss Bolton.’

‘I know, dearest boy, I know,’ says Lady Rylton, in the tone one would use to an acute sufferer. ‘It is very noble of you, Maurice. It is a sacrifice. I felt sometimes I had no right to demand——’

‘The sacrifice is hers,’ says he shortly, gloomily.

His eyes are bent upon the ground.

‘Hers! That little upst——that poor unsophisticated child! My dear Maurice, why run away with things? Of course she was charmed, enchanted, *flattered*, in that you admired her so much as to ask her to be your wife.’

‘She was not,’ says Maurice flatly.

‘Exactly what I should have expected from such a ——’ Lady Rylton checks herself in her fury. ‘From such an innocent creature,’ substitutes she. ‘But for all that, I shall consider how great is the sacrifice you have made, Maurice—how you have given up the happiness of your life to preserve the old name.’

‘I am beginning to get tired of the old name,’ said Maurice slowly. ‘Its nobility seems to me to be on the decline.’

‘Oh, not now,’ says Lady Rylton, who does not understand him, who could not, if she tried, fathom the depths of self-

contempt that he endures, when he thinks of this evening's work, of his permitting this child to marry him, and give him her wealth—for nothing—nothing! What *can* he give her in return? An old name. She had not seemed to care for that—to know the importance of it. 'Now it will rise again, and at all events, Maurice, you have saved the old home!'

'True!' says he. 'For you.'

'For *me*? Oh, dearest boy, what *can* you mean?'

'Yes, for you only. She refuses to live here with you.'

The very disquietude of his soul has driven him into this mad avowal. Looking at her with dull eyes and lowering brows, he tells himself—in this, one of the saddest hours of his life—that he hates the mother who bore him. Her delight in his engagement is odious to him; it seems to fan his rage against her. What has she ever done for him, what sympathy has she ever shown? She has embittered the life

of the woman he loves; she has insulted the woman he is to marry. What consideration does she deserve at his hands?

‘She refuses to live here with *me*?’ says Lady Rylton. ‘And why, may I ask?’

Her small, pale face flushes angrily.

‘I don’t know, really; you should be the one to know.’

His tone is so cold, so uncompromising, that she decides on coming to terms for the present. Afterwards, when that girl has married him, she will remember to some purpose, so far as *she* is concerned. There is a little tale that she can tell her.

‘Dearest Maurice, how could I? I always fancied I treated her with the utmost kindness. But why should we worry about it? No doubt it was a mere girlish fancy, a distaste,’ playfully, ‘to the terrible mamma-in-law of fiction. Such monsters do not exist now. She will learn that by degrees. You will bring her to stay with me for awhile on your return from your honeymoon?’

‘If you desire it.’

‘Of course I shall desire it; then she and I will become great friends. You are going? My love to your little *fiancée*, and say I am so charmed, so delighted! And tell her I should like her to come to me for a quiet little talk in the morning about eleven; I shall have no one with me then but Marian.’

‘She shall not come to you, then,’ says Rylton. A dark red mounts to his brow. What a diabolical thought—to receive those two together! ‘Do you *hear*?’ says he imperiously.

‘Good heavens, yes!’ says his mother, pretending prettily to cower before him. ‘What a tone! What a look! What have I done, then?’

‘What devilish cruelty is in your heart I don’t know,’ says he, his passion carrying him beyond all bounds; ‘but understand at once, I will not have Tita tortured.’

Lady Rylton leans back in her chair and laughs.

‘You would have made a good tragic actor,’ she says. ‘If this little plebeian throws you over after all, you should think of it. You remind me of your father when he was in his most amusing moods. There, go ; kiss Tita for me.’ Rylton turns to the door, his very soul on fire with rage. Just as he goes out, she calls to him, with a little soft musical ripple of laughter. ‘By-the-bye, take care you do not kiss Marian instead,’ says she.

\* \* \* \* \*

He meets Margaret on his way downstairs. He had walked up and down the passages above, in the dim light, with a view to bringing himself back into a state of control, with so much success that, when he comes face to face with Miss Knollys, he seems to her as self-possessed as usual. He had seen her talking to Tita in the hall below, in a somewhat earnest manner, and had taken it for granted that Tita had told her of their engagement.

‘Well,’ says he, stopping her.

‘ Well ? ’ returns she, smiling.

‘ You have heard ? ’

‘ Of what ? Anything new ? ’ curiously.  
The very best women are curious.

‘ Of my engagement ; surely she has told you ? ’

‘ She ? Who ? *Marian !* ’

‘ No—*no !* ’

Then the truth comes to her.

‘ Tita ? ’ she says faintly.

He nods his head ; words fail him.

‘ She told me nothing,’ says Margaret, recovering herself.

‘ Yet I saw you talking together just now.’

‘ You did indeed.’

‘ And she said nothing ? ’

‘ Nothing.’

‘ Then what *were* you talking about ? ’

‘ I was advising her to marry no man who did not love her.’

‘ What an extraordinary piece of advice to give to a girl who, as far as you knew, was not going to be married at all ! What led up to it ? ’



‘Not Tita, certainly. It was I who led up to it.’

‘And why?’

‘Do you think I have been blind and deaf, Maurice, during this past fortnight?’ Miss Knollys almost compels his gaze. ‘If you are going to marry this young girl, *this child*, I hope, I’—almost passionately—‘*hope* it will be for her good and yours.’

‘Margaret! What a tone! You mean something!’

‘I do.’ Margaret’s strong face lights up with honest anxiety. ‘I mean this!’ She takes a step nearer to him. ‘How is it between you and Marian?’

‘Why, how has it been?’ asks he, with affected lightness; but a change passes over his face.

‘Oh, Maurice, take care!’ says his cousin, laying her hand upon his arm.

‘Well, if you must have it,’ says he, frowning, ‘all that is over.’

He breaks away from her, frowning still.

It is quite plain to her that she has offended him. But even as he leaves her he looks back ; a sort of grim smile illumines his face.

‘I note that in your “hoping” you have put Miss Bolton before me ; that is as it should be. She is a sworn admirer of yours. Did you know it ?’

‘No. But she appeals to me—I don’t know why—but I feel that I could love her,’ says Margaret, in short sentences as if thinking, and as if a little surprised at herself. Suddenly she breaks into a more immediate feeling. ‘Oh, Maurice, love her too ! Try, *try* to love her ; she is so young. Her very *soul* is in your keeping. Be good to her ; she is a mere baby. If you neglect her, forget her——’

Maurice casts a queer look at her.

“ ‘Is thy servant a dog ?’ ” quotes he.

\* \* \* \* \*

Margaret moves slowly away. She had, when Maurice met her, been bent on going upstairs to her books and her thoughts ;

but now she turns backward. She feels as if she wants something. Perhaps she finds it—unconsciously, however—when she stops before a tall, soldierly-looking man, who, seeing her, comes to meet her with evident pleasure.

‘You look disturbed!’ says Colonel Neilson.

He is, as I have said, a tall man, with a kindly face, and deep eyes of a dark colour. There is nothing very special about him; he is not, strictly speaking, handsome, yet he was, last season, one of the most popular men in town.

‘Yes, and no,’ says Margaret. ‘My cousin has confided a sort of secret to me.’

‘A secret! I may not hear it, then?’

‘Well, I don’t know. It is, as I have hinted, a *sort* of secret, not very much to be kept.’

‘I may hear it, then?’

‘I suppose so. At all events,’ with a laugh, soft as silk, ‘I should like you to

hear it, because I want your opinion. You will give it ?'

'You know I will give you everything I have,' says he.

'Oh no ! you must not talk like that,' says she. 'Put all that on one side, and let me have you for my friend. I want one now—not for myself, but for another ; for two others, in fact. You know how fond I am of Maurice, and lately I have contracted quite a romantic, for *me*'—she pauses and laughs—'well, quite a romantic affection, for a little girl staying here with my aunt. You know who I mean—Tita Bolton.'

'A charming child !'

'I am so glad you like her ! But, as you say, she is a mere child ; and Maurice has proposed to her, and she has accepted him, and I am curious about her future.'

'Hers only ?'

'Oh no ! His, too !'

'It will be a risk, certainly,' says Colonel Neilson. 'I thought—I imagined—I had

heard that Rylton was engaged to his cousin, Mrs. Bethune—a very beautiful woman.’

‘How can you think so!’ says Margaret. ‘Well, yes, no doubt she *is* beautiful, but I should not like Maurice to marry her.’

‘You would prefer his marrying the “charming child”?’

‘I don’t know what I prefer,’ says Miss Knollys. She casts a reproachful glance at him that certainly is not deserved. Has he not served her late and early for the past six years? ‘I thought you would help me!’

‘You know I shall do that, however things may turn.’

‘Well, help me here. What *ought* Maurice to do? I am so dreadfully unhappy about this projected marriage of his.’

‘It seems to me you are unhappy about all things except those that concern yourself. Your own future seems a blank to you; is it not so?’

Miss Knollys makes a little movement.

‘Why should it be always a blank?’ says he. ‘Margaret,’ in a low tone, ‘let me fill it!’

Margaret rises impatiently.

‘After all, you can’t help me,’ says she, turning abruptly away.

‘Margaret, hear me!’

‘No, no, no! What is the use?’

She goes slowly down the hall.

## CHAPTER XI.

HOW THE LAST DAY COMES, AND HOW SOME  
STRANGE WORDS ARE SAID BEFORE THE  
MARRIAGE IS ACCOMPLISHED ; AND HOW  
MARIAN BETHUNE SCORES A POINT.

THE dawn of the wedding-day has broken. Everything has been hurried over as much as possible ; with no unseemly haste—just in the most ordinary, kindly way—however. But Lady Rylton's hand was at the helm, and she guided her barque to a safe anchor with all speed. She had kept Tita with her—under her eye, as it were—until the final accomplishment should have taken place.

The wedding, she declared, should be

from her house, from The Place, seeing that the poor darling child was motherless! She made herself all things to Tita in those days, although great anger stung her within. She had been bitterly incensed by Maurice's avowal that Tita had declined to live with her at The Place, but she had been mightily pleased, for all that, in the thought that therefore The Place would be left to her without a division of authority.

Sir Maurice had gone to Rickfort to interview 'Uncle George' of unpleasant fame. He had found him a rather strange-looking man, but not so impossible as Tita had led him to imagine. He made no objection of any sort to the marriage, and, indeed, through his cold exterior Maurice could see that the merchant blood in him was flattered at his niece's alliance with some of the oldest blood in England.

He was quite reasonable, too, about his niece's fortune. So much was to go to redeeming the more immediate debts on



the property ; for the rest, Sir Maurice declared he would have nothing to do with it. The money should be settled on his wife entirely. It was hers ; he had no claim to it. He would have something off his own property, a small thing, but sufficient for his requirements. He gave his word to quit the turf finally. He had no desire to amuse himself in that sort of way again—or, indeed, in other ways. He wished to settle down, etc. It occurred to old Bolton, who was a shrewd man, that Sir Maurice looked like one whose interest in life and its joys was at an end. Still, he was a baronet, and of very ancient lineage, and it was a triumph for the Boltons. He refused to acknowledge to *himself* that he was sacrificing his niece. It was not a sacrifice ; it was an honour !

For one thing the old man stipulated, or rather bargained. He had managed his niece's affairs so far with great success ; some of her money was in land, in Oakdean and Rickfort, for example ; the rest

he had invested securely, as he hoped and believed. If he might still be acknowledged as her guardian?

Sir Maurice, of course, gave in. Thoroughly ashamed and humiliated by the whole affair—he, the man, without a penny; she, the woman, possessed of all things in that line—it gave him genuine relief to tell her uncle that he would be actually thankful if he would still continue to be the head of her affairs, and manage her money matters, as he had managed them hitherto—and always with such happy results.

Mr. Bolton had bowed to him over his spectacles; his curious gray eyes caught a little addition of light, as it were. He was honoured by Sir Maurice's confidence, but, if he might suggest it, he thought that whilst Sir Maurice's affairs were righting themselves, he ought to allow himself a certain income out of his wife's money.

But Rylton would not hear of it. He had, as he had already told Mr. Bolton, a

small yearly income that he might with honesty call his own. It was specially small on account of his mother's jointure having to be paid out of the estate also. Of course he could not curtail that, nor would he desire to do so. And, seeing how deeply dipped the estates were, he could, of course, only take as much as he could reasonably desire. With his future wife's help, however, he felt the old property could be brought back in time to its former splendid position—to a position that he would be proud to see her the mistress of, etc.

There is always a good deal of humbug talked on these occasions. Maurice, perhaps, talked very considerably less than most people ; and, indeed, when he said he would gladly see her mistress of all he ought to have, he spoke something very near the truth. He was grateful to her beyond all words, and he had sworn to himself to be loyal to her.

Lady Rylton was distinctly annoyed

when she heard of the arrangements come to. She would have liked Maurice to have had entire control of his wife's fortune. And, oddly enough, Tita was annoyed too.

'Oh, I *wish* you had broken away entirely from Uncle George,' she had said to Maurice, when he had come down on one of his flying visits to The Place between his engagement and his marriage.

'But why? He seemed to me quite a nice old gentleman.'

She could not explain why, however, but only clung to her belief that they would be better without Uncle George. She hated him. That seemed to be the sum total of her objection.

Maurice had left The Place the morning after his engagement. He had had time to have an interview with his little *fiancée*, who seemed surprised that he wanted it in private, and who, to his great relief, insisted on making very cool adieux to him in the public hall, where everyone was passing to and fro, and where Mr. Gower

was making a nuisance of himself by playing ball against the library door. Naturally it was impossible to have an affecting parting there.

Marian had not come down to breakfast. And Sir Maurice was conscious of a passionate sense of relief. She had heard. He knew—he felt that! His mother would not spare her; and even if she had not cared as *he* had cared, still, unless she was the greatest fiend on earth, she must have had some small love for him—how *terribly* small he knows! He assures himself of that all day long in the living torture he is enduring, as if by it he can reconcile himself to his marriage with this child, whose money is so hateful, and whose presence is such a bore.

There are a few things, however, always to be thankful for. Tita, in the frankest fashion in all their interviews, has told him that she doesn't care a fig about him, that she is marrying him *only* to escape from Uncle George!

All their interviews have been but few. Sir Maurice had run down from here, and there, and everywhere, just for a night at a time, arriving barely in time for dinner, and going away before breakfast. Once, and once only, he had seen Mrs. Bethune. Those other times she had been confined to her room with neuralgia (what should we all do without neuralgia?), or with letters to write, or something, *anything* else.

That one time she came out of the library at the very moment he had arrived. They met in the hall, and it was quite impossible to avoid seeing him. She came forward with a charming air.

‘It is you? How long since we have met!’ said she. Her tone was evenness itself; she was smiling brightly. If she was pale, he could not see it in the darkening twilight. ‘How troublesome these elections are! I see you have been staying with the Montgomerys; I do hope he will get in. But Conservatives are

nowhere nowadays. Truth lies buried in a well. That's a good old saying.' She nodded to him and went up a step or two of the stairs, then she looked back. 'Don't stay away from The Place on my account,' said she, with rather an amused smile. 'I like to have you here. And see how badly you are behaving to the beloved one!'

She smiled again, with even more amusement than before, and continued her graceful way up the stairs. He had turned away sore at heart. She had not even thought it worth her while to make an appeal to him. If she had! He told himself that even then, if she had said but one word, he would have thrown up everything, even his *honour*, and gone with her to the ends of the earth. But she had not said that word—she had not cared—*sufficiently*.

\* \* \* \* \*

And now it is indeed all over! They have come back from the church—Tita just as she is every day, without a cloud

on her brow, and laughing with everybody, and telling everybody, without the least disguisement, that she is so *glad* she is married, because now Uncle George can never claim her again. She seems to have no thought but this. She treats her newly-made husband in a merry, perfectly unembarrassed, rather *boyish* style, and is, in effect, quite delighted with her new move.

Sir Maurice has gone through it all without a flaw. At the breakfast he had made quite a finished little speech (he could never have told you afterwards what it was about), and when the bride was upstairs changing her wedding garments he had gone about amongst his guests with an air that left nothing to be desired. He looks quite an ideal bridegroom. A mad longing for solitude drags him presently, however, into a small ante-room, opening off a larger room beyond. The carriage that is to convey him to the station is at the door, and he almost swears at the



delay that arises from Tita's non-appearance.

Yet here—here is rest. Here there is no one to breathe detestable congratulations into his ear—*no* one.

A tall, slight figure rises from a couch that is half hidden by a Chinese screen. She comes forward a step or two. Her face is very pale. It is Marian Bethune.

‘You!’ says she in a low, strange voice. ‘Have *you* come here, too, to *think*?’ She speaks with difficulty. Then all at once she makes a stray movement with her hands, and brings herself to her senses by a passionate effort. ‘You are like me, you want quiet,’ says she, with a very ordinary little laugh; ‘so you came here. Well, shall I leave you?’

‘She is looking very beautiful. Her pallor, the violet shades beneath her eyes, all tend to make her lovely.

‘It is you who have left me.’

‘I? Oh no! Oh, think!’ says she, laughing still.

Rylton draws a long breath.

‘After all, it could never have come to anything,’ says he, in a dull sort of way.

‘Never, never,’ smiling.

‘I don’t believe you care,’ says he bitterly.

She looks at him. It is a curious look.

‘Why should I? Do *you* care?’

‘I have cared too much.’

He turns away.

‘Don’t let us part bad friends,’ says she, going to him, and twining one of her hands round his arm. ‘What have I done to you, or you to me? How have we been enemies? It is fate, it is poverty that has been our common enemy. Maurice, remember what we *have* been to each other.’

‘It is what I dare not remember,’ says he hoarsely.

His face is resolutely turned from hers.

‘Well, well, forget, then, *if you can*. As for me, remembrance will be my sole joy.’

‘It is madness, Marian, to talk to me like this. What is to be gained by it?’

‘Why, nothing, nothing, and so let us forget; let us begin again as true friends only.’

‘There is no hope of that,’ says he.

His voice is a mere whisper.

‘Oh yes, there is—there,’ eagerly ‘*must* be. What! Would you throw me over altogether, Maurice? Oh, that I *could* not bear! Why should we not be as brother and sister to each other? Yes, yes,’ vehemently; ‘tell me it shall be so. You will ask me to your new house, Maurice, won’t you?’

She is looking up into his face, her hand still pressing his arm.

‘My wife’s house.’

‘Your wife’s house is yours, is it not? You owe yourself something from this marriage. You will ask me there now and then?’

‘She will ask her own guests, I suppose.’

‘She will ask whom *you* choose. Pah! what is she but a child in your hands?’

‘Tita is not the cipher you describe her,’ says Rylton coldly.

‘No, no; I spoke wrongly—I am always wrong, it seems to me,’ says she, with such sweet contrition that she disarms him again. ‘I cannot live if I cannot see you sometimes, and, besides, you *know* what my life is here, and how few are the houses I can go to, and’—she slips her arms suddenly round his neck—‘you *will* ask me sometimes, Maurice?’

‘Yes.’

‘You promise that?’

‘I promise that, as far as it lies in my power, I will always befriend you.’

‘Ah, that is not enough,’ says she, laughing and sobbing in the same breath. ‘I am losing you for ever. Give me something to dwell upon, to hope for. Swear you will make me your guest sometimes.’

‘I swear it,’ says he huskily.

He removes her arms from his neck, and holds her from him. His face is gray.

‘It is for the sake of our old *friendship* that I plead,’ says she.

The tears are running down her cheeks.

‘Our friendship,’ repeats he, with a groan.

He makes a movement as if to fling her from him, then suddenly catches her to his heart, and presses his lips passionately to hers.

\* \* \* \* \*

‘Maurice ! Maurice !’ calls somebody.

Marian sinks upon a couch near her, and buries her face in her hands. Sir Maurice goes into the hall to meet his bride.

The partings are very brief. Tita, who is in the gayest spirits, says good-bye to everybody with a light heart. Has not her freedom been accomplished ? She receives Lady Rylton’s effusive embrace calmly. There are some, indeed, who

say that the little bride did not return her kiss. Just at the very last, with her foot almost on the carriage step, Tita looks back, and seeing Margaret at a little distance, runs to her, and flings herself into her embrace.

‘You are mine now, my own cousin!’ whispers she joyfully.

‘God bless you, Tita,’ says Margaret in a whisper, too, but very earnestly, ‘and preserve to you your happy heart!’

‘Oh, I shall always be happy,’ says Tita; ‘and I shall hurry back to see *you*,’ giving her another hug.

Then somebody puts her into the carriage, and, still smiling and waving her hands, she is driven away.

‘Really, Margaret, you should be flattered,’ says Lady Rylton, with a sneer. ‘She seems to think more of you than of her husband.’

‘I hope her husband will think of her,’ returns Margaret coldly. ‘As I told you before, I consider this marriage ill done.’

## CHAPTER XII.

HOW TITA COMES BACK FROM HER HONEY-MOON, AND HOW HER HUSBAND'S MOTHER TELLS HER OF CERTAIN THINGS THAT SHOULD HAVE BEEN LEFT UNTOLD.

‘AND the weather—the weather was the most marvellous thing!’ says Tita, with enthusiasm. ‘Perpetual sunshine! Here, in September, it often pelts rain all day long!’

‘*Pelts!* My dear Tita, *what* a word!’ says Lady Rylton.

She sinks back in her chair as if overcome, and presses her perfumed handkerchief to her face.

‘What’s the matter with it?’ asks Tita,

a little smartly, perhaps. 'It's a right-down good word, in my opinion. I've heard lots of people use it.'

'No doubt *you* have,' says her mother-in-law.

'Well, so have you, I dare say!' says Tita.

'I expect we all have,' says Margaret Knollys, laughing. 'Still, you know, Tita, it's not a pretty word.'

'Very good; I shan't say it again,' says Tita, the mutinous little face of a moment ago now lovely with love.

She has come back from her honeymoon quite as fond of Margaret as when she started.

It is now the middle of September; outside on the lawn the shadows are wandering merrily from tree to tree. The sun is high, but little clouds running across it now and again speak of sharp rains to come.

'The air so soft, the pines whispering so low,  
The dragon-flies, like fairy spears of steel,  
Darting or poised.'



All these speak of the glad heat that still remains, though summer itself is but a dream that is gone.

Tita's honeymoon is at an end. It had seemed to her delightful. She had taken but a child's view of it. Maurice had been so kind, so good, so different from that nasty old uncle. He had been so good, indeed, that when he asked her to come home first to see his mother (Lady Rylton had made quite a point of this in her letters to him ; the county might think it so odd if the young wife did not appear anxious to fly into her arms on her return), she had said 'Yes' quite willingly, and with a grateful little glance. He had done so much for her, she must do something for him. But she hated going back to The Place, for all that. She wanted to go straight to her own old home, her beautiful Oakdean, without a single stop.

She has been at The Place now for a week. Margaret Knollys and Randal

Gower are the only two guests, Mrs. Bethune being on a visit to some friends in Scotland. The shooting here is excellent, and Sir Maurice has enjoyed himself immensely. Sir Maurice's wife has, perhaps, not enjoyed herself quite so much. But nothing, so far, has occurred to render her in the very least unhappy. If the clouds be black, she has not seen them. Her young soul has uplifted itself, and is soaring gaily amongst the stars. In her ignorance she tells herself she is quite, quite happy; it is only when we love that we doubt of happiness, and thus sometimes (because of our modesty, perhaps) we gain it. Tita has never known what love means.

There has been a little fret, a little jar to-day, between her and Lady Rylton. The latter's memory is good, and she has never forgotten what Maurice—in a moment's folly—had said of Tita's determination not to live with her at The Place. It is Lady Rylton's *rôle* to return to all, in

extra good measure, such injuries as she may judge herself to have received.

Tita naturally, in this small warfare, is at a disadvantage. She has forgotten her words, but even if she remembered them, would not for a moment suspect Maurice of having repeated them. And, indeed, Maurice, as we all know, had done it in a heated moment with best intent towards his small betrothed; besides, Tita at this time—so heartwhole and so *débonnaire*—gives no thinking to anything save the getting out into the fresh air in these uncertain days, and the breaking in of a young horse that Maurice has made her a present of. Danger walks behind her, but she never turns her head; what has she to fear?

‘Youth, that knows no dread  
Of any horrors lurking far ahead,  
Across the sunny flowered fields of life’

carries her safely right into the enemy’s camp. Cruel youth!

‘Won’t you come out with me and have

a stroll in the gardens before tea?' asks Margaret, rising. It seems to her that the social air is growing a little too sultry. 'Come, Tita; it will do you good.'

'Oh, I should love it!' says Tita, starting to her feet.

'Dear Margaret, you forget that, though Tita has been here for a week, this is the very first quiet moment I have had with her! Do not tempt her from me!'

'Certainly not, Tessie, if you wish to have her with you,' says Margaret, re-seating herself.

Now, more than ever, she feels there is danger in the air.

'Don't let me keep *you*,' says Lady Rylton, with deliberation. 'Go, dear Margaret, and get some of the sweet evening air—it may be of use to your complexion; it is the tiniest bit yellow of late. And when one is twenty-five—it *is* twenty-five?'

She knows Margaret's truthful nature.

'Thirty,' says Margaret, who knows her, too, to the very ground.

‘Ah, impossible!’ says Lady Rylton sweetly. ‘Twenty-five, Margaret—not a day more! But, still, your complexion—— There, go away and refresh it; and come back when I have had my little chat with my dearest Tita.’

Margaret casts a swift glance at the girl sitting there, apparently quite unconscious of the coming storm, and with her hands twined behind her head. She has her legs crossed—another sin—and is waving one little foot up and down in a rather too careless fashion.

Tita looks back at her.

‘Don’t be long,’ says she inaudibly.

Margaret gives her a nod, and goes out through the window.

‘My dearest child,’ says Lady Rylton, nestling cosily into her chair, and smiling delicately at Tita over the top of her fan, ‘you may have noticed that I gave dear Margaret her *congé* with intent?’

‘I saw that you wanted to get rid of her,’ says Tita.

‘I fear, my dear, your training has been somewhat defective,’ says Lady Rylton, biting her lips. ‘We never—we in society, I mean—never “get rid” of people. There are better ways of doing things, that——’

‘It must cause you a lot of trouble,’ says Tita. ‘It looks to me like walking half a dozen times round your bath on a frosty morning, knowing all along you will have to get into it.’

‘Sh!’ says Lady Rylton. ‘My dear, you should not mention your *bath* before people.’

‘Why not? When one loves a thing, one speaks of it. Don’t *you* love your bath?’ asks Tita.

Lady Rylton sits glaring at her, as if too horrified to go on. Tita continues:

‘If you don’t, you ought, you know,’ says she.

‘You must be out of your mind to talk to me like this,’ says Lady Rylton at last. Something in the girl’s air tells her that

there is some little touch of devilment in it, some anger, some hatred. 'But, naturally, I make allowances for you. Your birth, your surroundings, your bringing up, all preclude the idea that you should know how to manage yourself in the world into which you have been thrown by your marriage with my son.'

'As for my birth,' says Tita slowly, 'I did not choose it; and you should be the last to throw it in my teeth. If you disapproved of it *before* my marriage with your son, why did you not say so?'

'There were many reasons,' says Lady Rylton slowly, deliberately. 'For one, as you know, your money was a necessity to Maurice; and for another——' She breaks off, and scans the girl's face with an air of question. 'Dare I go on?' asks she.

'Why should you not dare?' says Tita.

A quick light has come into her eyes.

'Ah, that is it! I have something to say to you that I think, perhaps, should be said, yet I fear the saying of it.'

‘For you, or for me?’ asks Tita.

She has her small brown hands clasped tightly together in her lap now. There is something nervous in the tension of them. ‘Where, *where* is Margaret? For all that, she looks back at her mother-in-law with a clear and fearless glance.

‘For you,’ says Lady Rylton—‘for you only! But before I begin—I am a very nervous person, you know, and scenes,’ again pressing her handkerchief to her face, ‘upset me so—tell me, *do* tell me, if you have a good temper!’

‘I don’t know,’ says Tita. ‘Why?’

‘Well, a reasonable temper! I know Maurice would try anything—*less* than that.’

‘Has it to do with Maurice? Yes, I am *very* reasonable,’ says Tita, laughing. She shows all her pretty teeth. ‘Now for your other reason for deigning to accept me as your son’s wife!’

She laughs again. She seems to turn Lady Rylton into a sort of mild ridicule.



‘I don’t think I should laugh about it if I were *you*,’ returns Lady Rylton calmly, and with the subdued air that tells her intimates when she is in one of her vilest moods. ‘I feel very sorry for you, my poor child ; and I would have warned you of this thing long ago, but that I dreaded the anger of Maurice.’

‘Why, what *is* it?’ cries Tita vehemently. ‘Has Maurice murdered somebody, or defrauded somebody, or run away with somebody?’

‘Oh no! He did not run *away* with her,’ says Lady Rylton slowly.

‘You mean—you mean——’

The girl is now leaning forward, her small face rather white.

‘I mean that he has been in love with his cousin for the past two years.

‘His cousin!’ Tita’s thoughts run to Margaret. ‘Margaret?’

‘Nonsense!’ says Lady Rylton ; the idea strikes her as ludicrous. The surprise, the strange awakening to the young

bride, who, if not in love with her husband, has at all events expected loyalty from him, has affected her not at all ; but this suggestion of Margaret as a possible lover of Maurice's convulses her with amusement. 'Margaret! *No!*'

'Who, then?' asks Tita.

'Marian—Marian Bethune.'

'Mrs. Bethune!'

'Did you never guess? I fancied perhaps you had heard nothing, so I felt it my duty to let you into a *little* of the secret—to *warn* you. Marian might want to stay with you, for example — and Maurice——'

'Mrs. Bethune may stay with me with pleasure,' says Tita. 'Why not?'

'Why *not*?' Lady Rylton pauses as if half choking. She had thought to lower this girl into the very dust, and revenge herself on Maurice at the same time by her shameful revelation. 'You do not care, then?' says she, bitterly disappointed.

Tita does not answer her. Suddenly

her young thoughts have gone backwards, and all at once she remembers many things. The poison has entered into her. In a moment, as it were, she is back in that dim conservatory where Maurice (he has never been 'he' or 'him' to her, as happier girls, who love more and are more beloved, would have styled him)—where Maurice had asked her to marry him.

Now, in some strange fashion, her memory grows alive and compels her to remember how he looked and spoke that night—that night of his proposal to her, when she had asked him if he loved his cousin.

There had been a queer, indescribable change in his face—a sudden pallor, a start! She had thought nothing of it then, but now it comes back to her. *She* had meant Margaret—Margaret whom she loves; but he—who had *he* meant?

Really it doesn't matter so much after all, this story of Lady Rylton's. Maurice can go his way and she hers—that was

arranged ! But, for all that, it *does* seem rather mean that he should have married her, telling her nothing of this.

‘Care ! why should I care ?’ says she suddenly, Lady Rylton’s last words clinging to her brain, in spite of all its swift wanderings during the last sixty seconds.

‘Such an admirable indifference would almost lead me to believe that you had been born of good parentage,’ says Lady Rylton, cold with disappointed revenge.

‘I was born of excellent parentage——’ Tita is beginning, when the sound of footsteps slowly mounting the stairs of the veranda outside comes to them.

A second later Mr. Gower shows himself.

## CHAPTER XIII.

HOW A YOUNG AND LOVELY NATURE TAKES  
A SHOCK MOST CRUELLY ADMINISTERED.  
AND HOW A DOWAGER TAKES A NEW  
NAME AS A DIRECT INSULT. AND HOW  
TITA DECLINES TO PROMISE ANYTHING.

HE stands at the open window looking in. All at once Tita knows and *feels* that Margaret has sent him to rescue her from captivity.

‘Lady Rylton,’ calls he, ‘won’t you come out? The evening is a perfect dream—a boon and a blessing to men, like those pens, you know.’

The elder Lady Rylton answers him. She leans forward, a charming smile on her wonderfully youthful features.

‘No. No, thanks.’ She shakes her pretty, fair head at Gower in a delightfully coquettish fashion. Dear boy! How sweet it is of him to come and fetch her for a little stroll among the hollyhocks. ‘I can’t go out now. Not *to-night*, Randal!’

‘Oh! er—so sorry! But——’ He looks at Tita. It is impossible not to understand that the Lady Rylton he had intended to take for a little stroll in the calm, delightful evening, had been the younger Lady Rylton. ‘Well, if your—er—mother—won’t come, won’t *you*?’ asks he, now addressing Tita distinctly.

‘I am not going out either,’ says she, smiling gently at him. To go now will be to betray fear, and she—no, she will not give in, any way, she will never show the white feather. She will finish this hour with Lady Rylton, whatever it may cost her.

‘Really?’ asks Gower. He looks as if he would have persuaded her to come

with him, but something in her manner convinces him of the folly of persistence.

‘Yes, really,’ returns she, after which he goes down the steps again. They can hear him going, slowly this time, as if reluctantly, and step by step. There doesn’t seem to be a run left in him.

‘How absurd it is, this confusion of titles!’ says Lady Rylton, as the last unsatisfactory step is lost to them in the distance. ‘Lady Rylton here and Lady Rylton there. Absurd, *I* call it.’ She makes a pretence at laughter, but it is a sorry one—her laugh is only angry.

‘I suppose it can’t be helped,’ says Tita indifferently. Her eyes are still downcast, her young mouth a little scornful.

‘But if you are to be Lady Rylton as well as I, how are we to distinguish? What am *I* to be?’

‘The Dowager, I suppose,’ says Tita, with a little flash of malice. She has been rubbed the wrong way a trifle too much for *one* afternoon.

‘*The Dowager!*’ Lady Rylton springs to her feet. ‘I—do you think that *I* shall follow *you* out of a room?’

‘Follow me! I’d hate you to follow me anywhere!’ says Tita, who does not certainly follow her as to her meaning.

‘That is meant to be a smart speech, I presume,’ says Lady Rylton, sinking back into her seat once more. ‘But do not for a moment imagine that I dread you. You know very little of Society if you think you will be tolerated *there*.’

‘I know nothing of Society,’ returns Tita, now very pale, ‘and perhaps you will understand me when I say that I never want to know anything. If Society means people who tell hateful, unkind stories of a husband to his wife, I think I am very well out of it.’

‘That is a little censure upon poor me, I suppose,’ says Lady Rylton with a difficult smile. She looks at Tita. Evidently she expects Tita to sink into the ground beneath that austere regard, but Tita comes up smiling.



‘Well, yes. After all, I suppose so,’ says she slowly, thoughtfully. ‘You shouldn’t have told me that story about Maurice and——’ She stops.

‘I shall not permit you to dictate to me what I should or should not do,’ interrupts Lady Rylton coldly. ‘You forget yourself! You forget what is due to the head of this house.’

‘I do not, indeed; Maurice will tell you so!’

‘Maurice! What has he to do with it?’

‘Why, he *is* the head,’ slowly.

‘True, you are right so far,’ says Lady Rylton bitterly. ‘But I was not alluding to the *actual* head; I was alluding to the—the *mistress* of this house.’ She pauses, and looks with open hatred at the little girl before her. Tita could have answered her, have told her that her authority was at an end for ever, but by a violent effort she restrains herself. Tita’s naturally warm temper is now at boiling-point. Still, she puts a restraint upon herself.

‘ You will understand for the future, I hope,’ says Lady Rylton, who has lost all control over *her* temper ; ‘ you will, for the future, at all events, I trust, bear yourself with respect towards the mistress of this house.’

Her manner is so insolent, so unbearable, that Tita’s short-lived calm gives way.

‘ Maurice says I am the mistress here,’ says she distinctly, clearly.

‘ You ! *you*——’ Lady Rylton advances towards her with a movement that is almost threatening.

‘ Don’t be uneasy about it,’ says Tita, with a scornful little laugh, and a gesture that destroys the meaning of Lady Rylton’s. ‘ I don’t want to be the mistress here. I dislike the place. I shall be delighted if you will live here—*instead of me.*’

‘ You are too good !’ says Lady Rylton, in a choking tone. She looks as if she could kill this girl, whom she has driven to so fierce an anger.

‘I think it dismal,’ goes on Tita. ‘I like light and gay places.’ There is a little clutch at her heart, though why, she hardly knows. What she *does* know is that she hates this pretty, fair, patrician woman before her—this woman with a well-bred face, and the vulgarest of all vulgar natures. This woman who has betrayed her son’s secret. Even to so young a girl, and one who is not in love with her husband, the idea of that husband being in love with somebody else is distinctly distasteful.

‘Besides, remember,’ says Tita, ‘Mrs. Bethune lives here. After all you have told me of her, and—Maurice—you,’ breaking into a gay little laugh, ‘could hardly expect me to make this place my home.’

‘You certainly seem to take it very lightly,’ says Lady Rylton. ‘Maurice must be congratulated on having secured so *compliant* a wife.’

‘Why should I care?’ asks Tita, turning a bright face to her. ‘We made a bar-

gain before our marriage—Maurice and I. He was to do as he liked.'

'And you?'

'I was to follow suit.'

'*Outrageous!*' says Lady Rylton. 'I shall speak to Maurice about it. I shall warn him. I shall tell him how I disapprove of you, and he——'

'He will do nothing,' interrupts Tita. She stands up, and looks at the older woman as if defying her. Her small face is all alight, her eyes are burning.

'I dare say not, after all,' says Lady Rylton, with a cruel smile. 'He knew what he was about when he made that arrangement. It leaves him delightfully free to renew his love-affair with Marian Bethune.'

'If he desires such freedom it is his.' Tita gathers up her fan, and the long suède gloves lying on the chair near her, and walks towards the door.

'Stay, Tita!' cries Lady Rylton hurriedly. 'You will say nothing of this to

Maurice. It was in strict confidence I spoke, and for your good and his. You will say nothing to him?’

‘I! what should I say?’ She looks back at Lady Rylton, superb disdain in her glance.

‘You might mention, for example, that it was I who told you.’

‘Well, why shouldn’t I?’ asked Tita. ‘Are you ashamed of what you have said?’

‘I have always told you that I spoke only through a sense of duty, to protect you and him in your married life. You will give me your word that you will not betray me.’

‘I shall give you my word about nothing,’ coldly. ‘I shall tell Maurice, or I shall not tell him, just as it suits me.’

## CHAPTER XIV.

HOW TITA COMES TO OAKDEAN, AND IS GLAD.

AND HOW MAURICE CALLS TO HER, AND  
SHE PERFORMS AN ACROBATIC FEAT. AND  
HOW A DISCUSSION ARISES.

WHAT a day it is! Golden light everywhere, and the sounds of singing birds, and the perfume of the late mignonette and stocks. Who shall say summer is gone? Tita, flitting gaily through the gardens and pleasure-grounds of her old dear home, her beloved Oakdean, tells herself that it is summer *here* at all events, whatever it may be in other stupid homes.

Oakdean to-day is at its best, and that is saying a great deal. The grand old

lawn, studded here and there with giant beeches, seems sleeping solemnly in the warm light, and to their left the lake lies, sleeping too, rocking upon its breast the lily leaves, whose flowers are now all gone. Over there the hills are purple with flowering heather, and beyond them, yet not so far away but that the soft murmuring of it can be heard, dwells the sea, spreading itself out, grand, immense, until it seems to touch the pale blue heavens.

Tita, stopping with her hands full of flowers, stands upright, and as a little breeze comes to her, draws in a long breath, as if catching the salt from the great ocean that it brings her. Oh, what a day—what a day!

Her lovely old home! Here she is in it once more—parted for ever from the detested uncle, mistress of this one place that holds for her the only happy memories of her youth. Here she and her father had lived—she a young, *young* child, and he an old one—a most happy couple; and

here, too, she had grown to girlhood. And now here she is again, free to roam, to order, to direct, with no single hitch anywhere to mar her happiness.

The lovely new horse that Maurice has got for her leaves nothing to be desired ; she has had a gallop on him this morning. And all her dear dogs have been sent to Oakdean, so that her hands are full of favourites. As for Maurice himself, he is delightful. He doesn't even *know* how to scold. And it will always be like this—always. As for that story of Lady Rylton's about Marian Bethune—why, Marian is quite an old thing ! And besides—well, besides, it doesn't matter. Maurice is here now, and he can't see her, and even if he did—well, even if he did, what harm ? Neither she nor Maurice even *pretends* to be in love with the other, and if he should be in love—as the idiots call it—with Mrs. Bethune, why, he *can* be ! *She* won't prevent it, only she hopes poor Maurice won't make himself unhappy over that



dreadful red-headed creature. But there is certainly one thing; he might have told her.

But what does anything matter? Here she is in her old home, with all her dear delights around her! She glances backwards and forwards, a happy smile upon her lips. From one of the Scotch firs over there, the graceful blossoms of the hopplant droop prettily. And beyond them on the hillside, far, far away, she can see mushrooms gleaming in the fields, for all the world like little sheep dotted here and there. She laughs to herself as she notes the resemblance. And all is hers—all. And she is in her own home, and happy.

What a blessing she hadn't said 'No' when Maurice asked her. If she had, she would have been living at Rickfort now with Uncle George.

'Tita!' cries Maurice.

He has thrown up the window of his smoking-room, and is calling to her.

'Yes?'

She turns to him, her arms full of flowers, her vivacious little face, just like another sort of flower, peeping over them.

‘Can you come in for a moment?’

‘Why can’t you come out? *Do*, it is lovely here!’

‘I can if you like, but it will mean hauling out pencils and paper, and——’

‘Oh well, I’ll come.’

She runs to him across the green, sweet grass, and, standing beneath the window, holds out her hands to him.

‘You can’t come in this way,’ says he.

‘Can’t I? I wish I had a penny for every time I *did* get in this way,’ says she.

‘Here, give me your hands.’

He stoops to her, and catches her small brown hands in a close grip. The new Lady Rylton plants a very shapely little foot against an excrescence in the wall, and in a second has her knee on the window-sill.

‘After all, my mother was right,’ says Rylton, laughing. ‘You are a hoyden.’

He takes the slight girlish figure in his arms, and swings her into the room. She stands for a second looking at him with a rather thoughtful air. Then—

‘Your mother may call me names if she likes,’ says she. ‘But *you* mustn’t!’

‘No?’ laughing again. She amuses him with her little air of authority. ‘Very good. I shan’t! I suppose I may call you wife, any way.’

‘Oh, that!’ She stops. ‘Did you bring me in to ask me that question?’

At this they laugh together.

‘No. I confess so much.’

‘What, then?’

‘Well, we ought to decide at once who we are going to ask for the rest of the shooting. The preserves are splendid, and it seems quite a sin to let them go to waste. Of course I know a lot of men I could ask, but there should be a few women, too, for you.’

‘Why for me? I like men a great deal better,’ says Tita audaciously.

‘Well, you shouldn’t! And, besides, you have some friends of your own to be asked.’

‘Your friends will do very well.’

‘Nonsense!’ with a touch of impatience. ‘It is you and *your* friends who are first to be considered; afterwards we can think of mine.’

‘I have no friends,’ says Tita carelessly.

‘You have your uncle, at all events; he might like——’

‘Oh, don’t be an ass!’ says Lady Rylton.

She delivers this excellent advice with a promptitude and vigour that does her honour. Rylton stares at her for a moment, and then gives way to amusement.

‘I shan’t be if I can help it,’ says he; ‘but there are often so many difficulties in the way.’ He hesitates as if uncertain, and then goes on. ‘By the way, Tita, you shouldn’t give yourself the habit of saying things like that.’

‘Like what?’

‘Well, telling a fellow not to be an ass,

you know. It doesn't matter to me, of course, but I heard you say something like that to old Lady Warbeck yesterday, and she seemed quite startled.'

'Did she? Do her good!' says Tita, making a charming little face at him. 'Nothing like electricity nowadays. It'll quite set her up again. Add *years* to her life.'

'Still, she wouldn't like it, perhaps.'

'Having years added to her life?'

'No; your slang.'

'She likes *me*, any way,' says Tita nonchalantly, 'so it doesn't matter about the slang. The last word she mumbled at me through her old false teeth was that she hoped I'd come over and see her every Tuesday that I had at my command (I'm not going to have *many*), because I reminded her of some granddaughter who was now in heaven, or at the Antipodes—it's all the same.'

She pauses to catch a fly—dexterously, and with amazing swiftness, in the palm of

her hand—that has been buzzing aimlessly against the window-pane. Having looked at it between her fingers, she flings it into the warm air outside.

‘So you see,’ continues she triumphantly, ‘it’s a good thing to startle people. They fall in love with you at once.’

Here, as if some gay little thought has occurred to her, she lowers her head and looks at her dainty finger-nails, then up at Rylton from under half-closed lids.

‘What a good thing I didn’t try to startle *you*!’ says she. ‘*You* might have fallen in love with me, too.’

She waits for a second as it were, just time enough to let her see the nervous movement of his brows, and then—she laughs.

‘I’ve escaped that bore,’ says she, nodding her head. She throws herself into a big chair. ‘And now, as the parsons say, “to continue”; you were advising me to ask——’

‘Your uncle.’

All the brightness has died out of Rylton's voice ; he looks dull, uninterested. That small remark of hers—what memories it has awakened ! And yet—*would* he go back ?

‘ Chut ! What a suggestion ! ’ says Tita, shrugging her shoulders. ‘ Don’t you know that my one thought is to enjoy myself ? ’

‘ A great one, ’ says he, smiling strangely.

She cares for nothing, he tells himself : *nothing !* He has married a mere butterfly ; yet how pretty the butterfly is, lying back there in that huge armchair, her picturesque little figure flung carelessly into artistic curves, her soft, velvety head rubbing itself restlessly amongst the amber cushions. The cushions had been in one of the drawing-rooms, but she had declared he was frightfully uncomfortable in his horrid old den, and had insisted on making him a handsome present of them. She seems to him the very incarnation of exquisite idleness, the idleness that knows no thought.

‘Very good,’ says he at last. ‘If you refuse to make up a list of *your* friends, help me to make up a list of mine. You know you said you would like to fill the house.’

‘Ye—es,’ says she, as if meditating.

‘Of course, if you don’t want any people here——’

‘But I do. I do really. I *hate* being alone!’ cries she, springing into sudden life and leaning forward with her hands clasped on her knees.

‘How few rings you have!’ says he suddenly.



## CHAPTER XV.

HOW TITA TELLS OF TWO STRANGE DREAMS,  
AND OF HOW THEY MOVED HER. AND  
HOW MAURICE SETS HIS SOUL ON ASKING A  
GUEST TO OAKDEAN ; AND HOW HE GAINS  
HIS DESIRE.

‘Not one, except this,’ touching her engagement ring. ‘That you have given me.’

‘You don’t care for them, then ?’

‘Yes, I do. I love them, but there was nobody to give them to me. I was very young, you see, when poor daddy died.’

She stops ; her mouth takes a mournful curve ; the large gray eyes look with a sort of intensity through the windows to

something—*something* beyond—but something that Rylton cannot see. After all, *is* she so trivial? She cares, at all events, for the memory of that dead father. Rylton regards her with interest.

‘*He* would have given me rings,’ she says.

It is so childish, so absurd, that Rylton wonders why he doesn’t want to laugh. But the little sad face, with the gray eyes filled with tears, checks any mirth he might have felt. A sudden longing to give her another ring, when next he goes to town, fills his heart.

‘Well! what about our guests?’

Her tone startles him. He looks up. All the tears, the grief are gone; she is the gay, laughing Tita that he *thinks* he knows.

‘Well, what?’ His tone is a little cold. She *is* superficial, certainly. ‘If you decline to ask your friends——’

‘I don’t decline. It is only that I *have* no friends,’ declares she.

There is something too deliberate in her manner to be quite natural, and Rylton looks at her. She returns his glance with something of mockery in hers.

‘It isn’t nice to be married to a mere nobody, is it?’ says she, showing her pretty teeth in a rather malicious little laugh.

‘I suppose not,’ says Rylton steadily. ‘I haven’t tried it.’

A gleam—a tiny gleam of pleasure comes into her eyes, but she wilfully repulses it.

‘Oh, you—if anybody. However, you knew *before* you married me, that is one comfort.’

‘Why do you speak to me like that, Tita?’ A frown has settled on Rylton’s forehead. It is all such abominably bad form. ‘You know how—how——’

‘Ill-bred it is,’ supplies she quietly, gaily.

‘It is intolerable,’ vehemently, turning away and walking towards the door.

‘Ah, come back! Don’t go—don’t go!’ cries she eagerly. She jumps out of her big chair and runs after him. She slips her hand through his arm, and swinging her little *svelte* body round, smiles up into his face mischievously. ‘What’s the matter with you?’ asks she.

‘It is in such bad taste,’ says Rylton, mollified, however, in a measure in spite of himself. ‘You should consider how it hurts me. You should remember you are my wife.’

‘I do. That is why I think I can say to you what I can’t say to anybody else,’ says Tita quietly. ‘However, never mind; sit down again and let us settle the question about our guests. Here’s a sheet of paper,’ pushing it into his hands. ‘And here’s a pencil—an awfully bad one, any way, but if you keep sticking it into your mouth it’ll write. *I’m* tired of licking that pencil.’

She is evidently hopeless! Rylton, after that first crushing thought, gives way, and,

leaning back in his chair, roars with laughter.

‘And am I to lick it now?’ asks he.

‘No, certainly not.’ She is now evidently in high dudgeon. She puts the pencil back in her pocket, and stands staring at him with her angry little head somewhat lowered. ‘After all, you are right; I’m horrid!’ says she.

‘*I’m* right! By what authority do you say that! Come now, Tita!’

‘By my own.’

‘The very worst in the world, then. Give me back that pencil.’

‘Not likely,’ says Tita, tilting her chin. ‘Here’s one belonging to yourself,’ taking one off the writing-table near. ‘This can’t offend you, I hope. After all, I’m a poor sort,’ says Tita, with a disconsolate sigh that is struggling hard with a smile to gain the mastery. ‘It’s awfully hard to offend me. I’ve no dignity—that’s what your mother says. And after all, too,’ brightening up, and smiling now with delightful

gaiety, 'I don't want to have any. One hates to be hated !'

'What an involved speech ! Well, if you won't give me your pencil, let us get on with this. Now, to begin, surely you *have* someone you would like to ask here, in spite of all you have said.'

'Well—perhaps.' She pauses. 'I want to see Margaret,' says she, hurriedly, tremulously, as if tears might be in her eyes.

He cannot be sure of that, however, as her lids are lowered. But her tone—is there a note of unhappiness in it ? The very thought gives him a shock ; and of late has she not been a little uncertain in her moods ?

'*I* was going to name her,' says Rylton.

'Then you see we have one thought in common,' says Tita.

She has knelt down beside him to look at his list, and suddenly he lays his palm under her chin, and so lifts her face that he can see it.

‘What is it, Tita?’ says he. ‘Is anything troubling you? Last night you were so silent; to-day you talk. It is bad to be unequal.’

His tone is grave.

‘The night before last I had a bad dream,’ says Tita solemnly, turning her head a little to one side, and giving him a slight glance that lasts for the tiniest fraction of a second.

It occurs to Rylton that there is a little touch of wickedness in it. At all events, he grows interested.

‘A bad dream?’

‘Yes, the worst!’ She nods her small head reproachfully at him. ‘I dreamt you were married to a princess!’

‘Well, so I am,’ says Rylton, smiling.

His smile is a failure, however; something in her air has disconcerted him.

‘Oh no! No, she was not like me; she was a tall princess, and she was beautiful, and her hair was like a glory round her head. She was a very dream in herself;

whereas I—— Naturally, that puts me out of sorts!’ She shrugs her shoulders pathetically. ‘But last night’—she stops, clasps her hands, and sits back on her heels. ‘Oh no! I shan’t tell you what I dreamt last night,’ says she. She shakes her head at him. ‘No, no! indeed, not if you asked me *for ever!*’

‘Oh, but you must!’ says he, laughing.

He catches her hands and draws her up gently into a kneeling position once more—a position that brings her slender body resting against his knees.

‘Must I?’ She pauses as if in amused thought, and then, leaning confidentially across his knees, says, ‘Well, then, I dreamt that you were madly in love with *me!* And, oh, the joy of it!’

She breaks off, and gives way to irrepressible laughter. Covering her face with her hands, she peeps at him through her fingers as a child might who is bent on mischief.

‘Is all that true?’ asks Maurice, colouring.



‘What, the first dream or the second?’

‘I presume one is as true as the other,’ somewhat stiffly.

‘You are a prophet,’ says Tita, with a little grimace. ‘Well now, go on, do. We have arranged for Margaret.’ She pauses, and then says very softly, ‘*Darling* Margaret! Do you know, I believe she is the only friend I have in the world?’

Her words cut him to the heart.

‘And I, Tita, do I not count?’ asks he.

‘You! No!’ She gives him a little shake, taking his arms, as she kneels beside him. ‘You represent Society, don’t you? And Society forbids all that. No man’s wife is his friend nowadays.’

‘True,’ says Rylton bitterly. ‘Most men’s wives are their enemies nowadays.’

‘Oh, I shan’t be yours!’ says Tita. ‘And you mustn’t be mine either, remember! Well, go on—we have put down Margaret,’ peeping at the paper in his hand, ‘and no one else. Now, someone to meet her. Colonel Neilson?’

‘Yes, of course ; and Captain Marryatt ?’

‘And Mrs. Chichester to meet *him*.’

‘My dear Tita, Mrs. Chichester has a husband somewhere !’

‘So she told me,’ says Tita. ‘But, then, he is so *very* far off, and in your Society distance counts.’

Rylton regards her with some surprise. Is she satirical ?—this silly *child* !

‘You will have to correct your ideas about Society,’ says he coldly. ‘By all means ask Mrs. Chichester here, too ; I, for one, prefer not to believe in scandals.’

‘One must believe in something,’ says Tita. ‘I suppose,’ pencil poised in hand, ‘you would like to ask Mr. Gower ?’

‘Certainly.’

‘And his aunt ?’

‘Certainly *not*.’

‘Oh, but *I* should,’ says Tita ; ‘she amuses me. Do let us ask old Miss Gower !’

‘I begin to think you are a wicked child,’ says Rylton, laughing, whereon

Miss Gower's name is scrawled down on the list. 'There are the men from the barracks in Merriton; they can always be asked over,' goes on Maurice. 'And now, who else?'

'The Marchmonts!'

'Of course.' He pauses. 'And then—there is Mrs. Bethune!'

'Your cousin! Yes!'

'Shall we ask her?'

'Why should we *not* ask her?' She lifts one small, delicate, brown hand, and, laying it on his cheek, turns his face to hers. 'Don't look out of the window; look at *me*. Why should we not ask her?'

'My dear child, there is no answer to such a question as that.'

'No!' She scribbles Mrs. Bethune's name on her list, and then, 'You particularly *wish* her to be asked?'

'Not particularly. Certainly not at all if you object to it.'

'Object! Why should I object? She

is amusing—she will keep us all alive; she will help you to entertain your people.’

‘I should hope you, Tita, would help me to do that.’

‘Oh, I have not the air—the manner! I shall feel like a guest myself,’ says Tita. She has sprung to her feet, and is now blowing a little feather she had found upon her frock up into the air. It eludes her, however; she follows it round the small table, but all in vain—it sinks to the ground. ‘What a *beast* of a feather!’ says she.

‘I don’t like you to say that,’ says Rylton. ‘A *guest* in your own house!’

‘You don’t like me to say anything,’ says Tita petulantly. ‘I *told* you I was horrid. Well, I’ll be mistress in my own house, if that will please you. But,’ prophetically, ‘it won’t. Do you know, Maurice,’ looking straight at him with a defiant little mien, ‘I’m more glad than I can tell you that I don’t care a ha’penny

about you, because if I did you would break my heart.'

'You have a high opinion of me!' says Maurice. 'That I acknowledge. But, regarding me as you do, I wonder you ever had the courage to marry me!'

'Well, even *you* are better than Uncle George,' says she. 'Now, go on; is there anyone else? The Heriots! Who are they? I heard you speak of them.'

'Ordinary people; but he shoots. He is a first-class shot.'

'Heriot! It reminds me——' Tita grows silent a moment, and now a little flood of colour warms her face. 'I have someone I want to ask, after all,' cries she. 'A cousin—Tom Hescott.'

'A cousin?'

'Yes. And he has a sister—Minnie Hescott. I should like to ask them both.' She looks at him. 'They are quite presentable,' says she whimsically.

'Your cousins would be, naturally,' says he.

Yet his heart sinks. What sort of people are these Hescotts ?

‘I have not seen them for years,’ says Tita—‘never since I lived with my father. Tom used to be with us always then, but he went abroad.’

‘To Australia ?’

‘Oh no—to Rome ! To Rome first, at all events ; he was going to India after that.’

‘For——’

‘Nothing—nothing at all. Just to see the world !’

‘He must have had a good deal of money !’

‘More than was good for him, I often heard. But I *did* like Tom ; and I heard he was in town last week, and Minnie with him, and I should like very much indeed to ask them here.’

‘Well, scribble down their names.’

‘I dare say they won’t come,’ says Tita, writing.

‘Why ?’

‘Oh, because they know such lots of people. However, I’ll try them, any way.’ She flings down her pencil. ‘There, that’s done ; and now I shall go and have a ride before luncheon.’

‘You have been riding all the morning!’

‘Yes.’

‘Do you never get tired?’

‘Never! Come and see if I do.’

‘Well, I’ll come,’ says Rylton.

‘*Really!*’ cries Tita ; her eyes grow very bright. ‘You mean it?’

‘Certainly I do. It is my place, you know, to see that you don’t overdo it.’

‘Oh, how delightful!’ says she, clapping her hands. ‘I hate riding alone. We’ll go right over the downs, and back of Scart Hill, and so home. Come on—come on,’ running out of the room ; ‘don’t be a minute dressing.’

## CHAPTER XVI.

HOW A DULL MORNING GIVES BIRTH TO A  
STRANGE AFTERNOON. AND HOW RYLTON'S  
EYES ARE WIDENED BY A FRIEND.

‘Good old day!’ says Mrs. Chichester disgustedly. She is sitting near the window in the small drawing-room at Oakdean, watching the raindrops race each other down the panes.

‘What’s the matter with it?’ asks Mr. Gower, who is standing beside her, much to the annoyance of Captain Marryatt, who is anxious to engage her for some waltzes at the dance old Lady Warbeck is giving in the near future.

‘What *isn’t* the matter with it?’ asks



Mrs. Chichester, turning her thin shoulders, that always have some queer sort of fascination in them, on Gower. She gives him a glance out of her blue-green eyes. She is enjoying herself immensely, in spite of the day, being quite alive to the fact that Captain Marryatt is growing desperate, and that old Miss Gower, whom Tita has insisted on asking to her house party, is thinking dark things of her from the ottoman over there.

‘What’s it good for, any way?’

‘For the ducks,’ says Mr. Gower, who is always there. An answer to any question under the sun comes as naturally to him as sighing to the sad.

‘Oh, well, I’m not a duck,’ says she prettily; whereupon Mr. Gower whispers something to her that makes her laugh, and drives Captain Marryatt to frenzy.

He comes forward.

‘Lady Rylton is talking of getting up something to pass the time,’ says he, regarding Mrs. Chichester with a frowning

brow—a contortion that fills that frivolous young woman's breast with pure joy.

‘May the heavens be her bed!’ says Mr. Gower, who has spent some years in Ireland, and has succeeded in studying the lower orders with immense advantage to himself, but not very much to others. He has, at all events, carried off from them a good deal of the pleasant small-talk, whereas they had only carried off from him a wild wonder as to what he was and where born, and whether he ought or ought not to be inside a lunatic asylum. They had carried off also, I am bound to add, a considerable amount of shillings. ‘Lady Rylton!’ to Tita, who has just come up, ‘is this a reality or a mere snare? Did you say you thought you could put us successfully through this afternoon without reducing us to the necessity of coming to bloodshed?’ Here he looks, first at Captain Marryatt, who providentially does not see the glance, and then at Mrs. Chichester, who laughs.

‘I’m not sure. I haven’t quite thought it out,’ says Tita. ‘What would *you* suggest, Margaret?’ to Miss Knollys. ‘Or you, Tom?’ to a tall young man who has followed in her quick little progress across the room.

He is her cousin, Tom Hescott. He is so very much taller than she is, that she has to look up at him—the top of her head coming barely to a level with his shoulder. She smiles as she asks her question, and the cousin smiles back at her. It suddenly occurs to Sir Maurice, who has strolled into the room (and in answer to a glance from Mrs. Bethune is going to where she stands), that Tom Hescott is extraordinarily handsome.

And not handsome in any common way, either. If his father had been a duke, he could not have shown more breeding in look and gesture and voice. The fact that ‘Uncle Joe,’ the sugar merchant, *was* his actual father, does not do away with his charm; and his sister, Minnie Hescott, is

almost as handsome as he is! All at once Rylton seems to remember what his wife had said to him a few weeks ago, when they were discussing the question of their guests. She had told him he need not be afraid of her relations; they were presentable enough, or something like that. Looking at Tom Hescott at this moment, Sir Maurice tells himself, with a grim smile, that he is, perhaps, a little *too* presentable—a sort of man that women always smile upon. His grim smile fades into a distinct frown as he watches Tita smiling now on the too presentable cousin.

‘What is it?’ asks Mrs. Bethune, making room for him in the recess of the window that is so cosily cushioned. ‘The cousin?’

‘What cousin?’ demands Sir Maurice, making a bad fight, however; his glance is still concentrated on the upper part of the room.

‘Why, *her* cousin,’ says Mrs. Bethune, laughing. She is looking younger than

ever and radiant. She is looking, indeed, beautiful. There is not a woman in the room to compare with her ; and few in all England outside it.

The past week has opened out to her a little path that she feels she may tread with light feet. The cousin, the handsome, the admirable cousin ! What a chance he affords for—vengeance ! vengeance on that little fool over there, who has *dared* to step in and rob her—Marian Bethune—of her prey !

‘ Haven’t you noticed ? ’ says she, laughing lightly, and bending so close to Rylton as almost to touch his ear with her lips. ‘ No ? Oh, silly boy ! ’

‘ What do you mean ? ’ asks Rylton a little warmly.

‘ And after so many days ! Why, we *all* have guessed it long ago. ’

‘ I’m not good at conundrums, ’ coldly.

‘ But this is such an easy one. Why, the handsome cousin is in love with the charming little wife, that is all. ’

‘You say everyone has been talking about it,’ says Rylton. His manner is so strange, so unpleasant, that Marian takes warning.

‘Ah! That was an exaggeration. One *does* talk much folly, you know. No—no! It was I only who said it—at least’—hesitating—‘I think so.’ She pauses to let her hesitation sink in, and to be as fatal as it can be. ‘But you know I have always your interests at heart, and so I see things that, perhaps, others do not see.’

‘One may see more than——’

‘True—true; and of course I am wrong. No doubt I imagined it all. But, even if it should be so,’ laughing and patting his arm softly, ‘who need wonder? Your wife is so pretty—those little things often *are* pretty—and he is her cousin—they grew up together, in a sense.’

‘No, I think not.’

‘At all events, they were much together when she was growing from child to girl.

And old associations — they——’ She stops as if some dart has struck her. Rylton looks at her.

‘Are you ill?’ says he sharply. ‘You look pale.’

‘Nothing, nothing.’ She recovers herself and smiles at him, but her face is still white. ‘A thought, a mere thought—it cannot be only Tita and her cousin who have old associations, who have—*memories*.’

Her eyes are full of tears. She leans toward him. This time her lips *do* touch him—softly her lips touch his cheek. The curtains hide them.

‘Have *you* no memories?’ says she.

‘Marian! This is madness,’ says Rylton, turning suddenly to her. In a sense, though without a gesture, he repulses her. She looks back at him; rage is in her heart at first, but, seeing him as he is, rage gives place to triumph. He is actually livid. She has moved him, then. She still has power over him. Oh

for time, time only ! And he will be hers again, soul and body, and that small supplanter shall be lowered to the very dust !

\*            \*            \*            \*            \*

‘ Oh, how delightful ! The very thing,’ says Mrs. Chichester, clapping her hands.

The conversation at the other end of the room is growing merrier ; Tita, in the midst of a small group, has evidently been suggesting something in a most animated fashion.

‘ We should have to put all the things back,’ says Minnie Hescott, glancing round her at the small chairs and tables that abound.

‘ Not at all—not at all,’ says Tita gaily ; ‘ we could go into the smaller dancing-room and have it there.’

‘ Oh, of course ! Splendid idea !’ says Minnie.

She is a tall, handsome young creature, standing fully five feet five in her dainty little black silk stockings. Her eyes are dark and almond-shaped like her brother’s,



and there is a little droop at the far corners of the lids that adds singularly to their beauty ; it gives them softness. Perhaps this softness had not been altogether meant, for Mother Nature had certainly not added gentleness to the many gifts she had given Miss Hescott at her birth. Not that the girl is of a nature to be detested ; it is only that she is strong, intolerant, and self-satisfied. She grates a little. Her yea is always yea, and her nay, nay. She would always prefer the oppressed to the oppressor, unless, perhaps, the oppressor might chance to be useful to herself. She likes useful people. Yet, with all this, she is of a merry nature, and very popular with most of her acquaintances. Friends, in the strictest sense, she has none. She doesn't permit herself such luxuries.

She had been at once attracted by Tita. Naturally Tita *would* be useful to her, so she has adopted her on the spot. Baronets' wives are few and far between upon her

visiting list, and to have an actual cousin for one of them sounds promising. Tita will probably be the means of getting her into the Society for which she longs; therefore Tita is to be cultivated. She had told Tom that he must be *very* specially delightful to Tita; Tom, so far, has seemed to find no difficulty in obeying her. To him, indeed, Tita is once more the little merry, tiny girl whom he had taught to ride and drive in those old, good, past, sweet days, when he used to spend all his vacations with his uncle.

‘Will you come and help us?’ says Tita, turning to Gower.

That young man spreads his arms abroad as if in protestation.

‘What a question from you to me!’ says he reproachfully.

“‘Call, and I follow; I follow, *though* I die!’”

‘You’re too silly for anything,’ returns she most ungratefully, turning her back upon him.

“ ‘ ’Twas ever thus,” ’ says Mr. Gower, who seems to be in a poetical mood. ‘ Yet what have I done ? ’

‘ Oh, nothing — nothing ! ’ cries Tita petulantly. ‘ It is only the day ! Surely it would depress anyone ! ’

Her eyes have wandered down the room, and are now fixed upon the curtains that hide the window where Mrs. Bethune and her husband are conversing.

‘ Anyone but *me* ! ’ says Mr. Gower, with an exalted air. ‘ I was up early this morning to—— ’

‘ Up early ! I like that ! When *were* you up ? ’ asks Mrs. Chichester, between whom and Randal there is always a living feud. ‘ Why, you can’t get up even on Sundays, I hear, to be in time for service ! ’

‘ What it is to be clever ! ’ says Mr. Gower, looking at her with enthusiastic admiration. ‘ One hears *so much* ’—pause—‘ that isn’t true ! ’

‘ That’s a mere put off,’ says she. ‘ When

were you up this morning? Come now—honour bright!

‘At shriek of day,’ says Gower with dignity. ‘Were *you* ever up at that time?’

‘Never!’ says Mrs. Chichester, laughing.

She has evidently that best of all things—a sense of humour; she gives in.

‘Well, I was. I wish I hadn’t been,’ says Mr. Gower. ‘When I opened my window the rain beat upon me so hard that I felt it was a sort of second edition kind of thing when I took my bath later on.’

‘I’m so sorry the weather is turning out so horrid,’ says Tita.

‘I don’t see why you should ever be sorry about anything,’ says Tom Hescott, in his slow, musical voice.

‘Don’t you?’ She turns to him in a little quick way—a way that brings her back to that hateful window down below there. ‘You are right,’ she laughs gaily. It seems as if she had really cast that window and its occupants behind her for

ever. 'Well, I *won't* be. By-the-by, I told you all that we are to go to a dance at Lady Warbeck's on Thursday week? Thursday!—yes. Thursday week.'

'I remember! How delightful!' cries Mrs. Chichester.

'Lady Warbeck! I know her,' says Gower; 'she has a son!'

'Yes—a son.'

'Oh, *do* go on! Lady Rylton, do tell us about him,' says Mrs. Chichester, who is ever in search of fresh fields and pastures new.

## CHAPTER XVII.

HOW TITA SUGGESTS A GAME OF BLIND  
MAN'S BUFF, AND WHAT COMES OF IT.

‘WELL, I hardly can,’ says Tita, struggling with her memory. ‘He seems a big man, with—*airs*, you know, and—and——’

‘Trousers!’ puts in Mr. Gower. ‘I assure you,’ looking confidentially around him, ‘the checks on his trousers are so loud, that one can hear him *rattle* as he walks.’

‘Oh! is that the Mr. Warbeck?’ says Minnie. ‘I know; I met him in town last July.’

‘You met a hero of romance, then,’ says Gower. ‘That is, a thing out of the common.’

‘I know him too,’ says Mrs. Chichester, who has been thinking. ‘A big man, a sort of giant?’

‘A horrid man!’ says Tita.

Mrs. Chichester looks at her as if amused.

‘Why horrid?’ asks she.

‘Oh, I don’t know,’ says Tita, shrugging her shoulders. ‘I didn’t like him, anyway.’

‘I’m sure I’m not surprised,’ says Tom Hescott.

He takes a step closer to Tita, as if to protect her. It seems hideous to him that she should have to discuss—that she should even have known him.

‘Well, neither am I,’ says Mrs. Chichester. ‘He *is* horrid, and as ugly as the——’ She has the grace to stop here, and change her sentence. ‘As ugly can be.’

It is a lame conclusion, but she is consoled for it by the fact that some of her audience understand what the natural end of that sentence would have been.

‘And what manners!’ says she. ‘After all,’ with a pretty little shake of her head, ‘what can you expect of a man with hair as red as a carrot?’

‘Decency, at all events,’ says Tom Hescott coldly.

‘Oh! That—last of all,’ says Mrs. Chichester.

‘Lady Warbeck is a very charming old lady,’ says Margaret Knollys, breaking into the conversation with a view to changing it.

‘Yes,’ says Mrs. Chichester. She laughs mischievously. ‘And such a delightful contrast to her son! She is so good.’

‘She’s funny, isn’t she?’ says Tita, throwing back her lovely little head, and laughing as if at some late remembrance.

‘No; good — *good!*’ insists Mrs. Chichester. ‘Captain Marryatt, were you with me when she called that day in town? No? Oh! *well,*’ with a little glance meant for him alone—a glance that restores him at once to good humour, and



his position as her slave once more—‘you ought to have been.’

‘What did she say, then?’ asks Minnie Hescott.

‘Nothing to signify, really. But as a contrast to her son, she is perhaps, as Lady Rylton has just said, “funny.” It was about a book—a book we are all reading nowadays; and she said she couldn’t recommend it to me, as it *bordered* on impropriety! I was so enchanted.’

‘I know the book you mean,’ says Mrs. Bethune, who has just sauntered up to them in her slow, graceful fashion.

‘Well, of course,’ says Mrs. Chichester. ‘Such nonsense condemning it! As if anybody worried about impropriety nowadays. Why, it has gone out of fashion. It is an exploded essence. Nobody gives it a thought.’

‘That is *fatally true*,’ says old Miss Gower in a sepulchral tone. She has been sitting in a corner near them, knitting sedulously until now. But now she uplifts her

voice. She uplifts her eyes, too, and fixes them on Mrs. Chichester the frivolous. 'Do your own words never make you shiver?' asks she austerely.

'Never,' gaily; 'I often wish they would in warm weather.'

Miss Gower uprears herself.

'Be careful, woman! be careful!' says she gloomily. 'There is a warmer climate in store for some of us than has been ever known on earth!'

She turns aside abruptly, and strides from the room.

Randal Gower gives way to mirth, and so do most of the others. Mrs. Chichester, it is true, laughs a little, but Tita can see that the laughter is somewhat forced.

She goes quickly up to her and slips her hand into hers.

'Don't mind her,' says she. 'As if a little word here and there would count, when one has a good heart, and I know you have one. We shall all go to heaven, I think, don't you? Don't mind what she

hinted about—about that other place, you know.'

'Eh?' says Mrs. Chichester, staring at her as if astonished.

'I *saw* you didn't like it,' says Tita.

'Well, I didn't,' says Mrs. Chichester, pouting.

'No, of course, one wouldn't.'

'One wouldn't what?'

'Like to be told that one would have to go to—*you* know.'

'Oh, I see,' says Mrs. Chichester, with some disgust. 'Is that what you mean? Oh, I shouldn't care a fig about that!'

'About what, then?' asks Tita anxiously.

'Well, I didn't like to be called a *woman*!' says Mrs. Chichester, frowning.

'Oh!' says Tita.

'Lady Rylton, where are you? You said you were going to get up blind man's buff,' cries someone at this moment.

'Yes, yes, indeed. Maurice, will you come and help us?' says Tita, seeing her husband, and going to him gladly, as a

means of getting out of her ridiculous interview with Mrs. Chichester, which has begun to border on burlesque.

‘Certainly,’ says Sir Maurice ; he speaks rapidly, eagerly, as if desirous of showing himself devoted to any project of hers.

‘Well, then, come on—come on,’ cries she, gaily beckoning to her guests right and left, and carrying them off, a merry train, to the ballroom.

‘Now, who’ll be blinded first?’ asks Mr. Gower, who has evidently constituted himself Master of the Ceremonies.

‘You!’ cries Miss Hescott.

‘Not at all. There is only one fair way of arranging that,’ says Tita. ‘I’ll show you. Now,’ turning to her husband, ‘make them all catch hands, Maurice—all in a ring, don’t you know—and I’ll show you.’

They all catch hands ; there is a slight tussle between Captain Marryatt and Mr. Gower (who is nothing if not a born nuisance wherever he goes), as to which

of them is to take Mrs. Chichester's right hand. This, providentially, is arranged by Mr. Gower's giving in, and consenting on a grimace from her to take her *left* hand. Not that he wants it. Tom Hescott has shown himself desirous of taking Tita's small fingers into his possession for the time being, at all events—a fact pointed out to Rylton by Mrs. Bethune with a low, amused little laugh; but Tita had told him to go away, as she couldn't give her hand to *anybody* for a moment, as she was going to have the conduct of the affair.

'Now, are you all ready?' asks she, and seeing them standing in a circle, hands entwined, she runs suddenly to Maurice, disengages his hand from Mrs. Bethune's with a little airy grace, gives her right hand to the latter, and the left to Maurice, and, having so joined the broken ring again, leans forward.

'Now,' cries she gaily, her lovely little face lit up with excitement, 'who ever the

*last* word comes to, he or she will have to hunt us! See?’

She takes her right hand from Mrs. Bethune’s, that she may point her little forefinger at each one in succession, and begins her incantation with Mr. Gower, who is directly opposite to her, nodding her head at each mystic word; and, indeed, so far as the beginning of it goes, this strange chant of hers mystifies everybody—everybody except Tom Hescott, who has played this game with her before, in the not so very distant past—Tom Hescott, who is now gazing at her with a most profound regard, all his soul in his eyes, oblivious of the fact that two pairs of eyes, at all events, are regarding *him* very curiously.

‘Hena, Dena, Dina, Dus.’

‘Good heavens!’ interrupts Mr. Gower, with extravagant admiration. ‘What command of language! I’—to Miss Hescott—‘didn’t know she was a linguist, did you?’

‘Calta, Wheela, Kila, Kus.’

‘Oh, I say!’ murmurs Mr. Gower faintly. ‘It can’t be right, can it, to say “cuss words” at us like that? Oh, really, Rylton, *would* you mind if I retired?’

‘Hot pan, Mustard, Jan,  
Tiddledum, taddledum, twenty-one,  
You raise up the latch, and walk straight out.’

The last word falls on Tom Hescott. ‘Out’ comes to him.

‘There, Tom! You must be blind-folded,’ says Tita delightedly. ‘Who’s got a *big* handkerchief?’

‘I wouldn’t stand that, Hescott, if I were you,’ says Colonel Neilson, laughing.

‘What is it?’ asks Tom, who is a little abstracted.

‘Nothing much,’ says Mrs. Chichester mischievously. ‘Except that Lady Rylton says your head is so big that she has sent to the housekeeper for a young sheet to tie it up in.’

Hescott smiles. He can well afford his smile, his head being wonderfully hand-

some, not too small, but slender and beautifully formed.

‘Give me yours,’ says Tita, thrusting her hand into her husband’s pocket and pulling out his handkerchief.

The little familiar action sends a sharp pang through Mrs. Bethune’s heart.

‘Now, Tom, come and be decorated,’ cries Tita. Hescott advances to her, and stops as if waiting. ‘Ah!’ cries she, ‘do you imagine I could ever get up there!’

She raises both her arms to their fullest height, which hardly brings her pretty hands even to a level with his forehead. She stands so for a moment, laughing at him through the gracefully uplifted arms. It is a coquettish gesture, though certainly innocent, and nobody, perhaps, would have thought anything of it but for the quick, bright light that springs into Hescott’s eyes. So she might stand if she were about to fling her arms around his neck.

‘Down on your knees,’ cries Tita, giving herself the airs of a little queen.



Hescott drops silently on to them. He has never once removed his gaze from hers. Such a strange gaze! One or two of the men present grow amused, all the women interested. Margaret Knollys makes an involuntary step forward, and then checks herself.

‘There!’ says Tita, who has now bound the handkerchief over Hescott’s eager eyes. ‘Now are you sure you can’t see? Not a blink?’ She turns up his chin, and examines him carefully. ‘I’m *certain* you can see out of this one,’ says she, and pulls the handkerchief a little farther over the offending eye. ‘Now get up. “How many horses in your father’s stable?”’

This is an embarrassing question, or ought to be, as Mr. Hescott’s father is dead; but he seems quite up to it. Indeed, it now occurs to Sir Maurice that this cannot be the first time he has played blind man’s buff with his cousin.

“Three white and three gray.”

‘An excellent stud!’ says Mr. Gower.

But Tita is not thinking of frivolities. Like Elia's old lady, the 'rigour of the game' is all she cares for. She gives Tom Hescott one or two little turns.

"Then turn about, and turn about," says she, suiting the action to the word, "And you won't catch *me* till May-day."

With this, she gives him a delicate little shove, and, picking up the train of her gown, springs lightly backwards to the wall behind her.

And now the fun grows fast and furious. Hescott, who, I regret to say, must have disarranged that handkerchief once for all, is making great running with the lady guests. As Mr. Gower remarks, it is perfectly wonderful how well he and Marryatt and the other men can elude him. There is no difficulty at all about it! Whereas Mrs. Chichester is in danger of her life at any moment, and Mrs. Bethune has had several narrow escapes. Tita, who is singularly nimble (fairies usually are), has been able to dart to and fro with com-

parative ease ; but Margaret Knollys, who, to everybody's immense surprise, is enjoying herself down to the ground, was very nearly caught once.

'That was a near shave,' says Colonel Neilson, who happens to be near her when she runs, flushed and laughing, to the doorway. And then—'How you are enjoying yourself!'

'Yes. Isn't it foolish of me ?' says she ; but she laughs still.

'It is the essence of wisdom,' says Neilson.

Here a little giggle from Mrs. Chichester tells of *her* having been nearly caught. And now, now there is a skirmish down there, and presently they can see Hescott drawing Tita reluctantly forward.

Tita is making frantic signs to Mr. Gower.

'It's not a fair capture unless you can guess the name of your captive,' says Gower, in answer to that frantic if silent appeal.

Hescott raises his right hand, pretends to feel blindly in the air for a moment, then his hand falls on Tita's sunny little head. It wanders on her short curls—it is a very slow wandering.

Mrs. Bethune looks up at Rylton, who is standing beside her.

‘Do you still doubt?’ asks she, in a low whisper.

‘Doubt! I am a past master at it,’ says he bitterly. ‘I should be! *You* taught me!’

‘I! Oh, Maurice!’

‘Yes—you! Yesterday, as it seems to me, I believed in everyone. To-day I doubt every soul I meet.’

At this point Hescott's ‘doubts,’ at all events, seem to be set at rest. His hand has ceased to wander over the pretty head, and in a low tone he says :

‘Titania!’

This word is meant for Tita alone. A second later he calls aloud :

‘Lady Rylton!’

But Maurice and Mrs. Bethune, who had been standing just behind him, had heard that whispered first word.

‘Oh, you are right,’ says Tita petulantly. ‘But you would never have known me but for my hair. And I *hate* being blindfolded, too. Maurice, will you take it for me?’ holding out to him the handkerchief.

‘No!’ says Rylton quietly, but decisively—so decisively that Mrs. Chichester suddenly hides her face behind her fan.

‘What a No!’ says she to Captain Marryatt. ‘Did you hear it? What’s the matter with him?’

‘He’s jealous, perhaps,’ says Captain Marryatt.

Mrs. Chichester gives way to wild, if suppressed, mirth.

‘Heavens! Fancy being jealous of one’s own wife!’ says she. ‘Now, if it had been anyone else’s——’

‘Yes, there would be reason in that!’ says Captain Marryatt, so gloomily that her mirth breaks forth afresh.

He is always a joy to her, this absurd young man, who, in spite of barbs and shafts, follows at her chariot wheels with a determination worthy of a better cause.

Gower, who also had heard that quiet 'No,' had come instantly forward, and entreated Tita to blindfold him. And once more the fun is at its height. Hescott, as compared with Randal Gower, is not even *in* it in this game. The latter simulates the swallow, and even outdoes that wily bird in his swift dartings to and fro. Great is his surprise, and greater still his courage—this last is acknowledged by *all*—when, on a final swoop round the room with arms extended, he suddenly closes them round the bony form of Miss Gower, who had returned five minutes ago, and who, silent and solitary, is standing in a distant corner breathing anathemas upon the game.

Everyone stops dead short—everyone looks at the ceiling; surely it *must* fall! There had been a general, if unvoiced, opinion up to this that Mr. Gower could

*see* ; but now he is at once exonerated, and may leave the dock at any moment without a stain upon his character.

‘Come away ! come away !’ whisper two or three behind his back.

Mrs. Chichester pulls frantically at his coat-tails ; but Mr. Gower holds on. He passes his hand over Miss Gower’s gray head.

‘It is—it is—it *must* be !’ cries he, in a positive tone. ‘It’—here his hand flies swiftly down her warlike nose — ‘it is Colonel Neilson !’ declares he, with a shout of triumph.

‘Unhand me, sir !’ cries Miss Gower.

She had not spoken up to this—but to compare her to a man ! She moves majestically forward. Gower unhands her, and, lifting one side of his would-be blind, regards her fixedly.

‘It was the nose !’ He looks round reproachfully at Neilson. ‘Just see what you’ve let me in for !’ says he.

‘Don’t talk to me, sir !’ cries his aunt

indignantly. 'Make no excuses — none need be made! When one plays demoralizing games in daylight, one should be prepared for anything;' and with this she once more leaves the room.

'Ah, we should have played demoralizing games at *midnight*,' says Mr. Gower, who doesn't look half as much ashamed of himself as he ought, 'then we should have been all right.'

Here somebody who is standing at one of the windows says suddenly :

'It is clearing!'

'Is it?' cries Tita. 'Then I suppose we ought to go out! But what a pity we couldn't have another game first!'

She looks quite sorry.

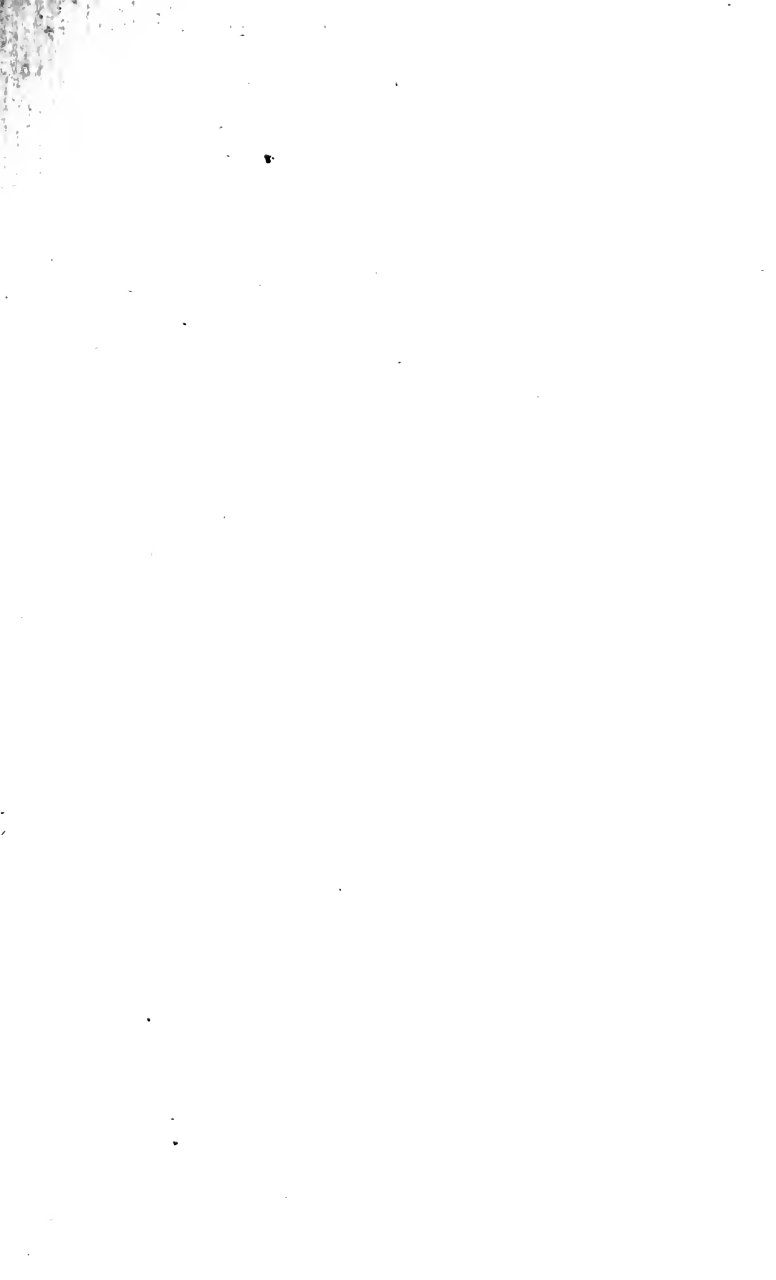
'You certainly seemed to enjoy it,' says Sir Maurice with a cold smile, as he passes her.

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